



BETTER THAN ICE CREAM
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BETTER THAN ICE CREAM

Alicia Sparks

Dedicated to Chris, Sean and Ian. And all that ice cream we eat!

Chapter One

Laura slowly ran her tongue around the tip, carefully holding her long hair out of her face. Her tongue flicked in and out before running along the sides, moving in one swift motion and then rolling around the summit before darting out to smooth across her satisfied lips. She smiled before taking the whole of it into her mouth. The pressure began to build as the liquid poured down her throat. She wasn't fast enough to lap it up as white beads dribbled out of her mouth and onto her hand. She quickly sucked the fleeing cream, as her body began to quiver a little. Her pulse raced, reminding her of a nice aerobic workout, which was all in the breathing anyway, and hers came in rapid pants.

She shifted, vying for a better position, knowing positioning was key. Well, that and a few other things. Hormones had a lot to do with it. And chemistry. Without the right mix of chemistry, all the hormones in the world wouldn't do a bit of good. She had experienced enough failures to prove that point. But not today. Today was one of those days every girl dreams about.

The discovery happened by surprise this morning, thrilling her completely. She smiled as she continued to take it into her mouth, licking, lapping, sucking a little.

She swore her insides melted as her tongue continued to work. Blaming it on the heat of the day or the heat in the room would be a lie. The orgasmic feeling had little to do with the surroundings and everything to do with the mixture of chemistry and hormones, which was about to melt around her toes and had already pooled between her thighs.

She groaned and began to work on the cone. This was damned good ice cream.

"Enjoying yourself?" Nick Martin watched, leaning against the doorframe. She knew exactly what Nick thought of her, she needed to get out more. This was evident by the half-smirk on his face.

"Tremendously," she smiled, licked her lips and then popped the rest of the cone into her mouth.

"If you get that worked up over an ice cream, I'd hate to see what you'd do to a man," he leaned against the doorframe, arms folded.

"You'd never see what I would do to a man," she snapped, a little grumpy now that her morning foreplay session with the fudge ripple had been interrupted.

"Thank God for some reprieves. Look, Amanda wanted to be sure you were still

coming to dinner tonight. She is hoping to finalize the deal with..."

"With Ryan LeJeune. I know. She only left ten messages last night." This deal with Ryan had everyone on edge, especially Laura. She hadn't seen him in—how long? Too long. Not long enough. A flush spread all the way to her ears when she pictured the tall, lean cowboy. Sin on a stick. Oh yeah.

"Well, this is your deal," he reminded her, shaking her from her reverie with his scolding tone. Ever since she had been trying to perfect this one ice cream flavor, the business end of her business seemed to be falling more and more into Amanda's hands, a problem Nick constantly vocalized.

"I know, I know," she rubbed at the chocolate stain making its way down the front of her coat. Why she bothered with a lab coat and not an apron was one of those mysteries even she couldn't explain. She wanted her work to be taken seriously. As science. She was more than just a cook. "I'll be there." She finally gave up on the stain and shot Nick a look, hoping he would get lost now so she could enjoy more of this morning's delight.

"You better," he warned. "I miss my wife. When you and your sister went into this business, you swore all she'd be doing is marketing," he reminded her, ignoring the scowl on her face.

"And she is. She's helping me close the deal with Ryan. That's marketing."

"In your little world, maybe," he snickered. "But in mine, it's negotiating. And that's your area."

"Did you need something else, oh brother-in-law of mine?" She laced the question with sarcasm, hoping to send him back to work. Or make him get to the point. She had too much on her mind today to deal with her sister's husband.

"No, I didn't," he smirked. "I just wanted to remind you. And Laura," he paused before turning to leave her "lab." "You have chocolate on your chin."

She swiped at the imposing dribble and looked at her watch. She still had time to enjoy another cone—or pint—of her newest creation before changing hats and becoming Laura Reynolds, owner and CEO of *I Scream*, the only ice cream in the country guaranteed to produce an orgasm. Okay, so it didn't say that on the package, but her customers knew why it cost twenty dollars a pint. And they kept coming back for more.

She pushed away from the counter and went back to the walk-in freezer. Forcing herself to replace fudge ripple, she sighed and promised to be back tonight for an encore if she closed the deal with Ryan LeJeune in a reasonable amount of time. Until then, she needed to review the notes concerning *LeJeune's Louisiana Cane* and try to come up with a workable scheme for combining the interests of the two companies.

And try to keep Ryan's dreamy blue eyes out of her head. This was business, she reminded herself. Strictly business.

LeJeune's was going under. She knew this from the figures Jeremy sent over. And it was no wonder. Ryan had abandoned the business several years ago, leaving everything to his younger brother, Blake. Unfortunately, Blake's interest in chasing the occasional supermodel outweighed running a sugar cane processing factory, a fact that gave Laura the advantage.

She took the stack of notes from the kitchen counter and eyed her three cousins who were busy testing the new ice cream for themselves. Cate, Robin and Karen had been a part of her company since its inception.

"I'll be back later, guys," she called to them before leaving. They nodded while devouring spoonfuls of the latest creation, the satisfied smiles on their faces proving

Laura hadn't been the only one to feel the rush of fudge ripple.

"See you," Karen waved her spoon in the air. Robin and Cate both just waved, too engrossed in the cool treat to say much of anything.

These were the rewards of ten years of college, she sighed. Laura learned how to manipulate the chemical make up of chocolate to produce the effects chocolate guaranteed, those of a simulated orgasm. And the great part was that the Reynolds girls all got to test the products.

I Scream was still a small company, but if she managed to seal the deal with Ryan, she could go global because she would have a cheap local supplier for her sugar. Not to mention, she would be the first ice cream manufacturer in the country to have her hands on his new no- calorie, no-fat, no-bad-side-effects sugar substitute.

She smiled at the thought of tripling her sales, a distinct possibility if she could cut back on the fat and calories of her product without altering the taste or the orgasmic quality. Those kinds of numbers would guarantee an expansion of the company and possibly a move to a larger city, maybe New Orleans even. She could give Ben and Jerry a run for their money if she could only get out of Oak Creek.

The dinner with Ryan was a necessary evil and a thought that made her wish her ice cream were tolerance inducing rather than orgasm inducing. Ryan LeJeune's reputation as a ladies' man preceded him, making her wish anyone else owned the company.

If the South were still the land of the gentlemanly rakes, Ryan would be a charter member of the club. On the outside, he was sweet as the sugar he produced, but on the inside, he was nothing but a sticky sin-filled treat, which easily melted in the sun. At least that's what all of his conquests said. He was gone before the morning sun rose and rarely ever called back. He had even cheated notoriously on his ex-wife who, of course, said she was sure he hadn't meant to.

Some women had no backbone when it came to men. Well, Laura wasn't one of them. In fact, if her ice cream kept getting better and better, she might eliminate the need for them all together. Who needed the hassle anyway?

And in the case of men like Ryan, who had moved out of Oak Creek after the divorce—he had already slept with most of the women in town anyway—he caused more problems for her than anything else. Two months of voice mail finally convinced him to meet with her. She resented this and knew his reluctance left an awful taste in her mouth, making her wish his brother, Blake, was in charge of the company instead of sowing his own oats in Greece.

Three o'clock came without warning, forcing her to shake the Ryan brain freeze from her head. She groaned, annoyed at herself for spending so much time thinking about him. It was the ice cream, she decided.

The final negotiations hadn't been thought out yet. And the small matter of choosing a dress to wear tonight only added to her agitation. She knew how to play the game with gentlemanly rakes. Show a little skin and addle their brains to the point where they would be willing to sign on the dotted line. But could she pull it off with someone like Ryan?

Ryan LeJeune hitched a ride on Dusty Bayonne's crop duster. Dusty flew into New Orleans twice a week to pick up his supplies, and he agreed to bring Ryan back to Oak Creek for his meeting. What would have been a five-hour drive was only an hour ride back on the small plane.

"You gonna be in town long?" Dusty asked as he dropped Ryan off at the LeJeune factory.

"Naw. Just a couple of days," he grinned, hoping it wouldn't take longer than that to get this company to see black again. Prepared to deal with Laura Reynolds by any means necessary, he jumped down from the cab of Dusty's big 4X4 truck.

"You need a ride back, then? I head back on Thursday."

"Thanks. But my brother bought a new Porsche before he left for Europe. I'm thinking about picking it up and bringing it back." Why Blake needed a Porsche, Ryan didn't know. But he planned on giving it a spin through town and taking it into *Nawlins* for show.

Dusty laughed, "I'd race you to New Orleans, but you'd probably beat me in something like that. Don't see many of them around on I-49."

"I know. I don't know what possessed him to sink fifty thousand dollars into a hunk of metal and fiberglass, but since he did, I plan on driving it." Hot cars are chick magnets. And these days, Ryan needed one because the LeJeune well of charm seemed to have run dry.

He waved his good-bye to Dusty and then turned to head into the factory, his backpack slung over his shoulder. Blake really let things slide, he thought, eyeing the peeling paint and rotten boards lining the porch.

The front of the old factory resembled a plantation store, homage to a great-great-grandfather who managed to buy himself out of slavery by working in the plantation's store.

Granpère would roll over in his grave if he saw the state of the place. When Ryan agreed to sell his share to his younger brother a few years ago, he hoped Blake's attention to detail would serve it right. At any rate, at least his share hadn't been lost to his snake of an ex-wife, Gina. Since Blake's early departure, Ryan's negotiation skills were crucial to saving the company.

He moved his foot up and down on one of the squeaky boards. The whole porch needed replacing. But first, he had to earn the money for repairs by getting the business up to speed. And that was going to take a hell of a lot of maneuvering with Laura Reynolds. Not exactly the homecoming queen, he mused before his train of thought was interrupted.

Jeremy Bentley stepped out onto the porch, filling up the entire doorway with his broad shoulders. He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at Ryan. "So the prodigal son returns."

"Something like that," Ryan grinned then moved forward to shake his friend's hand.

"Long time, no see. Let's see, last I heard you were shackled up in New Orleans with a pair of redheads who worked at Big Daddy's."

"Don't believe half of what you hear," he warned, thinking it would have been nice to live with a couple of strippers.

"I guess you're here to look over the figures," Jeremy opened the door and led Ryan in.

"Yeah. I've got to get them straight in my head before the big meeting tonight." He raked a hand through his wayward hair, cursing the tangles caused by the length and the curls.

"You done your research on that company?" Jeremy shot him a grin.

"That I have," he followed Jeremy into the office and sank down into the battered leather chair in front of the desk. Nothing had changed since his father's days in this office. The calendar from the 70's still hung on the wall next to the faded poster of Marilyn Monroe.

Jeremy took his usual seat behind the desk and pushed a folder in Ryan's direction. "That tone of your voice sounds like you don't put much stock in it."

"It doesn't matter what I put in it," he shrugged. "Point is, she took in damn near three million dollars last year. All hers. Who knows what the company made? Now that she's ready to go national, I expect it to skyrocket. That's the kind of train ride I want to be on."

"Yeah, but an ice cream that can cause an orgasm?" he wrinkled his nose. "I don't even see how that's possible."

"It's a simulated orgasm," Ryan reminded him, "and I don't care how it's possible or even if it is possible. All I care is that it sells." And saves my ass.

"Well, it does. The girls that work for her swear by it, too," he winked.

Ryan looked up from the paperwork. "You don't mean they are replacing ice cream for sex?"

"Not really replacing, just enhancing, I guess."

"Humph," he mumbled. Enhancing my ass. When did sex need to be enhanced with ice cream? Never in his experience.

"You do remember Laura, don't you?"

Laura Reynolds. Yeah. He remembered her. She had been well on her way to finishing college by the time he settled down enough to start. He barely finished his business degree by the time she had gotten her Ph.D. By then, he had married and divorced. "I remember Laura."

"You think this deal with her will get us to see black anytime soon?"

"I don't know. If the price is right, I think this would be a good deal for us. We can stay afloat, but I don't know for how long." He slapped the folder shut. "My head hurts. Can you just tell me how bad things are?" Is this gonna cost me my soul?

Jeremy laughed. "You sure you want to know?"

"Yeah. And as straightforward as possible, okay?"

"Okay. Well, you know Blake ran off with a nice chunk of change. It was all his. He had been paying himself nicely for the past six years. The loan from the bank to operate for the past six months is a million. That's not bad considering, but we need to make more than that to stay afloat with the interest and all. Bottom line is we need this deal with Laura." Jeremy's smiling face straightened.

The worry there made Ryan's stomach turn. This was his business and he shouldn't have taken it upon himself to shove it off on his brother and then his best friend. He straightened. "Damn. I really didn't know we were in such a bind."

"Well, we are. And now that you're here, you can have it."

"I'm sorry I put all of this on you, buddy." For the first time since his divorce, he felt like he had really let a lot of people down. He'd fix this mess. No matter what. Laura Reynolds should be easy enough to charm—even if his skills were rusty.

"Hey," Jeremy shrugged, "it's my job. Besides, you were off trying to make your own fortune."

Ryan knew his fortune hunting landed him square in the middle of this mess. The same thing would get them out, he vowed. His grandfather's company would not fold just because he wanted to do things on his own without the family connection. He mumbled his thanks to Jeremy and then went out back to check the machinery and talk to some of the workers.

His cousin, Danny, would be here in an hour with the Porsche to give him a ride to the house. He hoped it was in better shape than the factory. Otherwise, he was going to have a hell of a mess on his hands.

Ryan knew, subconsciously, when he hopped on that plane this morning, he wouldn't be going back to New Orleans. Something about the way his tiny apartment felt combined with the loneliness in his chest made him realize then he would be returning home to stay. And, quite frankly, the thought scared him to death. His roots were in Oak Creek, but, unfortunately, the town wasn't what it used to be. And rebuilding a business in a has-been town was a task he wasn't sure he could accomplish. He had no other choice, though. He took in a frustrated breath, hoping the fates would kindly send an answer to this dilemma his way. And he hoped to God the answer wasn't Laura Reynolds.

The last thing he needed right now was a complicated woman. And if he knew anything about women, he knew this one was complicated. Stubborn to a fault, determined, and single. It wasn't right for a woman to be single and thirty. That meant one of two things in his mind. Either she was unattractive or she was hard to handle. He hoped for the first. He could deal with unattractive.

Ryan tried to pay attention to Danny's nonstop chatter on the way to the house. The high school baseball team didn't interest him, even though he knew coaching was Danny's life. Instead, he concentrated on the ulcer growing in his stomach. He should just let the whole company go under. That's what a smart man would do. Sell it while he could.

But the formula burned a hole in his shirt pocket, promising fortune beyond his wildest imagination. His company may be small time now, but the potential to make it a multi-million-dollar operation existed. Diabetics, health nuts, all those people on the various low-carb diets, they all wanted a product like the one he could offer. And orgasm-producing ice cream was a good place to start.

Danny eased the Porsche into the driveway of the white two-story house. Ryan closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. *Please let the house be okay.* The rose garden his mother planted had wilted down to almost nothing. Paint chipped in small places, but overall, the house didn't look any worse for the wear. Thank God.

"I'm just gonna pick up my truck and I'll be out of your way," Danny called from behind Ryan, who stepped out of the car to gaze at his childhood home.

"Thanks, man, for coming to get me," he turned and shook Danny's hand before taking the key ring and cringing at the "player" logo emblazoned on it, which described Blake's attitude on life. Player to the end.

"No problem. And if you need anything, let me know."

"I'll do that."

Ryan held his breath, hoping the conditions inside the house would be favorable. As he fumbled with the lock, he tried not to think about what else could go wrong today.

Blake had been gone for six months. Not much could happen in six months, could it? At least Blake had the sense to lock up when he left. Stepping through the threshold, he almost tripped over the stack of mail waiting at the door.

Past due and overdue were stamped on the outside of several of them. A disconnect notice graced the top of the pile. He grabbed the mail and tossed it onto the hallway table and fumbled with the light. Great. That must have been the disconnect notice.

He tore open the envelope only to discover his correct assumption. Apparently, Blake hadn't paid the bill for quite a while. A five-hundred dollar electric bill wasn't possible for one month even in the heat of the summer. He wondered if the phone had been disconnected, too. Picking up the receiver in the hall, he had his answer. Dead as a doornail.

Glancing at his watch, he realized there were only three hours left before the dreaded meeting. His head started to pound. He took his cell phone from his belt clip and dialed the number for the electric company, hoping electricity would be enough to start things in the right direction.

"Louisiana Llectric," the voice on the other end said.

"Hi. This is Ryan LeJeune and I..."

"Ryan LeJeune! Well, I'll be. How are you, son?" the voice sounded excited to hear his name.

"Uh, fine," he didn't recognize the voice.

"This is Mabel Willis. You don't remember me, do you?"

"Mabel? Oh, yeah, sure. I remember you," he scanned his brain for a face. None came to him.

"Well, sugar, what can I do for you?"

"It seems my brother has a hefty bill with you guys here at the house and I was wondering if there was anything I could do to pay it and get the lights turned back on." Turn on the charm.

"Let me run your address and I'll tell you." She paused. "Oh, dear. Yeah, he's got quite a bill here. You gonna settle up for him?"

"How much exactly to do that?" He rubbed his temple with his free hand and vowed to kill Blake.

"Six-hundred-fifty dollars."

"The bill is for five hundred."

"That was the last month's bill."

"Well, nobody lived here for six months," he argued.

"Disconnect charge."

"Oh. Is there any way I can pay this out or something? I don't really have that kind of cash right now." The flashy sports car caught his attention through the window. He wondered how far behind it was and how much it would take to catch up payments on a Porsche.

"Well, you don't owe his money, you know. You could have them reconnected in your name. You can give us a forwarding address on Blake and come up with a two-hundred-dollar deposit to get them turned back on."

Two hundred was easier than six. "I don't have a forwarding address," he said, cursing Blake's untimely supermodel chase.

"I'll have to check it out then. I'll ask. Can you hold on?" She put him on hold

before he could answer.

"Okay, hon. You bring us your deposit and we'll work on it."

He let out an exasperated breath. "How soon are we talking?"

"Two days max," she said.

"Mabel, honey," he sweetened his voice a little more, "is there anything you can do? You know, help a guy out a little."

"I'm sorry, honey. I don't own the light company."

"Okay. Thanks."

Well, he could at least have the phone hooked up. Making the call to the local phone company ensured a two-day hook up. Just to set his mind at ease about the house, Ryan called the bank before taking a shower. Mr. Webber assured him both the house and the car were free and clear. He could sell the car. As for the house, it was part of the reason he came here. He cared about it and the factory. So much so that he handed it over to his brother rather than risk losing part of it to his ex-wife. So much for doing the right thing. He should have known better than to pass his problems on to Blake. The family business should have been Ryan's responsibility. Instead of taking it, he set off to build his own fortune, free of Oak Creek, the place where several generations of his family had put in thousands of man hours building a future. Well, he was back now and he refused to let his past negligence ruin things for future generations – if there were any.

Ryan undressed and stepped into the cold water. His body froze in reaction to it. He longed for a hot shower but was thankful that the old well was still hooked up to the house. Otherwise, he figured he'd be out of water as well as everything else.

He quickly washed and rinsed his hair and then stepped out of the shower. Blake left behind most of his clothing, so he knew he'd be able to find something to wear. He'd never figure out that brother of his.

He towel dried his hair, hoping the curls wouldn't frizz in the heat. What did one wear to impress the ice cream goddess? He rifled through Blake's closet and finally came up with a blue silk shirt and a pair of gray slacks. He'd like to wear his trademark cowboy hat, but dust still clung to it from traipsing around the factory this afternoon. Instead, he opted for Blake's black boots, staying in his comfort zone in spite of the silky shirt.

He dug through his bag to find the small decanter of his prized sugar, which he planned to use to seal the deal later tonight. Grabbing the keys to the Porsche, he headed out the door. And hoped Laura Reynolds was easily impressed.

Chapter Two

"Laura?" the voice on her cell phone asked.

"Where the hell are you?" she hissed into the phone, annoyed with her sister.

"I, uhm, you're on your own tonight, okay?" Laura heard noise in the background.

"No, it's not all right. I need you tonight." Panic gripped her. She never expected to have to meet with Ryan alone.

"Well, I can't come. You see, Nick and I... God, Laura, this new flavor is incredible."

"What are you doing?" Laura hoped her voice wasn't loud enough to carry across the restaurant. What were they doing, testing the product?

"Nick saw you today, uh, testing the ice cream and... well, he brought some home."

Laura let out a sigh as her stomach twisted into a knot. Newlyweds were useless. "Fine. I'll handle LeJeune myself. You better hope this deal doesn't fall through."

"Thanks, Laura."

"Sure, whatever," she said to the dial tone. She pressed the phone against her forehead, hoping the splitting headache she developed would go away soon. She really needed a clear head to deal with Ryan LeJeune.

God, she hoped he wasn't as good looking as he had been in high school. She'd never forget that smile of his, more of a smirk than anything else. And the way he teased her relentlessly. He was older and out of her league. The fact that their houses were divided by a fence was the only thing she had ever shared with him. If it hadn't been for the three acres on either side of the fence, maybe she would have had the nerve to walk over today and see if he was home.

She wouldn't have. Real nerve was not her strong point. She may be a semi-successful CEO right now, but she was still jelly on the inside. Especially when it came to men. Well, some men. LeJeune men in particular.

Laura signaled to the waiter as he passed. "I'll only need two," she indicated the menus. She gave a quick smile as he took away the extras. She eyed the place chosen for Amanda to sit and decided she'd much rather sit with her back to the wall, facing the door.

As soon as she stood, she saw the tall cowboy standing with the hostess. You couldn't easily miss one of the LeJeune boys. They both combined all of the wonderful elements of their Cajun and Creole heritage. While Blake's coloring was softer and highlighted with a head full of long, blonde hair, Ryan was golden brown with long dark hair. Both had to-die-for blue eyes.

Ryan looked as much at ease in the upscale restaurant as he did working in the fields. He moved with an easy grace from years of doing backbreaking labor. Laura let her eyes glide up and down his body, remembering why he always got all the girls' attention in school. In a word, he was hot.

She watched through her lashes as he strode toward her, his shirt hugging his chest with his every movement. His pants clinging to his thighs in all the right places. She bet his butt looked just as good. From the looks on the faces of the women as he walked by, she was right.

"Your table." Laura straightened, trying to ignore the obvious flutter of false eyelashes as the hostess led Ryan to the table.

"Thank you," he said lowly before turning to Laura. "Laura Reynolds." The sound of her name on his lips did nothing to calm her nerves. He said it with a challenge, making her wonder how it would sound vibrating against her throat as his lips...

"It's good to see you again." She reached out to shake his hand as formally and quickly as possible before sinking back into her chair. Nice, soft hands. She remembered hearing about Ryan LeJeune's velvet hands.

"You remember me?" He sank into the chair opposite her and then in one motion pulled it in a little closer.

"Of course I remember you," she smiled. Who could forget eyes like those?

"I always wonder. I've been gone so long."

"But not before you could leave your mark on Oak Creek." She hoped her teasing was appropriate. She very rarely ever came close to being speechless. Right now was

one of those times. He was more gorgeous up close today than she remembered from high school.

"Yeah, that," he laughed. "I'm afraid not everything you hear about me is true."

"Oh, now, don't destroy my fantasies." And what fantasies they could be... Her non-existent sex drive decided to kick itself into high gear. Twisting her fingers around a napkin, she resisted the urge to fan her face and give Ryan the satisfaction of knowing he still had it.

She noticed the spark instantly flare in his eyes at the mention of fantasies. Oh, what she could do to him! She bit her lip as he reached for the goblet of water, seemingly oblivious to her once more, the spark covered with a mask of indifference. "Are you ready to order?"

"Not yet." She picked up her menu, only halfway looking at it. She was still awestruck by his cover model appearance. Man, they sure could grow 'em here in Oak Creek.

"I haven't been here in a while," he managed. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Don't eat the ice cream," she let out a snort, feeling bold and daring and downright sexy in his presence. Everything about him made her wonder how he would feel moving above her, inside her. And all she could think of was how wild and dangerous this whole affair could be. God, she was already thinking in terms of affair. She needed another drink.

"It's not to your liking?"

"Not hardly. The eggplant parmesan is good, but you look more like a steak man." She teased, running her fingers along the top edge of her menu. If he were anything like most men, he would notice the candy apple red nail color and lose all train of thought. She had carefully chosen her outfit, wagering on Ryan's appreciation of low cut red dresses with slits up to her hips. So far, he seemed unaffected.

Ryan licked his lips, making her wonder how they would taste when they dipped down to brush against hers. Or rather when she pulled them into hers. "Actually, I'm more of a burger and fries kind of guy. But a steak sounds nice. Especially since we're on your tab," he reminded her.

"Then have a steak," she shrugged, imagining his hands slowly, carefully caressing the knife as it skillfully sliced the meat.

"I think I will."

Laura watched him signal for the waiter, something she would have done had she been trying not to stare at those long fingers of his. She imagined them doing all kinds of things to her that ice cream could never do. Five minutes in the guy's company and she was already prepared to write off her entire business as a grand hoax.

"So, Laura," her eyes lit up at the soft mention of her name, "tell me about your company."

"I thought we'd eat first and then talk shop later."

"Uh-uh," he shook his head. "I need to know what you've got in store for me before I eat."

What I've got in store for you... She forced herself to pay attention, to sit up a little straighter. "Well, you've heard of my company, right?"

"Who hasn't?"

"We make ice cream. And what I need is your sugar to be able to go nationwide with it." God, that came out wrong. You may as well say, honey, put it on a plate for me.

She felt the redness creep down to her exposed cleavage.

He splayed his hands on the white tablecloth, then looked up at her, meeting her eyes. "My, uh, sugar?"

She fully blushed now. That twinkling in his blue eyes sent all kinds of wicked thoughts through her head. New flavor names sprang forth all at once. *Ryan Mocha Melt. LeJeune Banana Split. Laura with Ryan on top...* Before she could recover, he spoke again.

"So, tell me about your product."

She shook the carnal thoughts from her head. "It's the best ice cream in the country, no matter what *Blue Bell* says."

"I know they claim to be the best ice cream around, but even they haven't broken through the market like I hear you plan to do. And I hear there's more to it than taste."

"I see you know your ice cream. And of course there's more to it than taste. How else could I sell it at the price I get for it?" She ran her finger along the edge of her water glass.

"Of course," he smiled, watching her never-still fingers move across the water glass.

"The point is, we can offer a mutually beneficial contract. Are you interested?" So much for working the deal. Amanda would kill her if she knew all the cards were on the table and dinner hadn't even been served yet. *Serves her right for playing with my ice cream.*

"And what if your company goes belly up?" He folded his arms, but she knew he was putting up a good front. If he weren't interested in this deal, he wouldn't be here.

"It won't. I can guarantee it."

"Your dinner," the waiter interrupted. "Can I get you anything else?"

"A bottle of your best champagne," Laura smiled. "You do drink, don't you?"

"Yeah. But I had something else in mind," he smiled before looking up at the waiter. "Two unsweetened teas." He took the small decanter from his pocket as the waiter walked away and slowly placed the silver container on the table. "I thought you might want to taste it first."

"Mmmm," she licked her lips, intentionally, fully, this time. "I was wondering what that was in your pants."

* * * * *

Ryan would have spilled his water had he been holding it. Instead, he breathed in small gasps, trying to calm himself as she flipped open the container and licked her finger before sticking it into the white substance. He sat on the edge of his seat as he watched her insert the finger between her full, red lips. Jaw clenched, he wondered how it would feel to insert something else there, wondered if it would light the fire in her eyes the way his sugar just had. His body reacted to the thought, and his jeans tightened. So much for unattractive. This meant one thing. Laura Reynolds was going to be one of those difficult girls he avoided at all costs. Funny, avoiding her didn't seem to be in his vocabulary right now.

"Oh, yeah," she sighed. "This is just what I needed."

Ryan had a flashback from *When Harry Met Sally* and hoped the sugar hadn't been *that* good. He'd hate to be outdone by a sweetener.

"This is incredible. You got any other surprises there?" she teased.

He leaned forward, meeting her challenge. When her eyes widened, he realized he'd caught her off guard. "Why don't you come over here and see?"

Breathing in relief when panic flashed across her face, he knew she was teasing him. Still, she fascinated him. Had Laura Reynolds been this cute in high school? Cute. He suppressed an inward laugh. There wasn't a damn thing cute about her. She was sin incarnate. No wonder she could create an ice cream that caused orgasms. She could cause them from across the room. He wished he carried a pencil with him to drop under the table so he could get a glance at those legs. The cleavage he caught before she hid it behind the menu. He hoped the lump in his throat went away soon.

"Your tea," the waiter interrupted.

"Allow me." Ryan took the sugar and spooned it into her tea and then his, imagining how he would much rather dip her finger into his glass.

"Thanks." She smiled and then took a big sip. "Wow. It's even better like this." She drank another big sip of the tea. "This is really good."

"So do we have a deal?"

"I don't know. We haven't really discussed the deal yet. What are your terms?"

"Well, first, I need to know more about your product. To be sure mine will remain stable." He tried to ignore the stirring in his pants. Damn, he'd been without a woman for too long, and Laura looked just like the kind of sin he needed to end the dry spell.

"I'm sure I can make yours remain firm," she sipped at the tea again, apparently ignoring her own sexual comment.

Firm. He shifted in his seat. Damn it. This was supposed to be a harmless business dinner. Not an outrageous flirtation with Laura Reynolds. "I'm sure you can. I don't suppose you have any of that orgasm producing ice cream up your dress, do you?"

The smile disappeared from her lips. He won the banter, sending her a look that let her know he wouldn't be afraid to go looking for said ice cream.

"No. But I do have some back at my place." She bit her lip, making him wonder if she regretted the invitation. "Excuse me for a minute." She stood, grabbing her bag, and pushed past him as he stood.

Ten minutes and she had run for the hills. *Welcome home, Ryan.* He watched her disappear behind the wall dividing the bar from the restaurant. He sank back into his chair, mulling over her invitation and reaction to it.

He was a LeJeune. A sex machine. That's what the women in his life had always expected from him. And he had produced. Millions of satisfied customers. Well, not exactly millions. And it *had* been a long time.

He hadn't been with a woman in over a year. The town's gossip mill wouldn't buy that. A LeJeune without a woman was like summer in Louisiana without thunderstorms. It was a rare occurrence.

Hell, he was thirty-three years old. Past time to settle down. He picked up the decanter of sugar and closed it, concentrating on the click to indicate the top was back in place.

Laura Reynolds.

He could play, couldn't he? Tease. See what she was all about. It would be harmless.

Right?

* * * * *

Laura ran for the restroom, dialing her sister with every step.

"Amanda. Come on, answer." She counted six rings before the machine picked up. "Amanda," she spoke to the machine. "I know you're home. Please pick up. This is an emergency." Her heart raced, threatening to beat out of her chest when she heard her sister fumbling on the other end of the phone. She hoped Amanda wouldn't hang up on her, like she had several times in the past. If she ever needed sisterly advice, it was tonight.

"Laura? You okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. Geez, have you *seen* Ryan LeJeune?" Her heart raced.

"No, why? Did you lose him?" Laura heard Nick moving around in the background. "It's Laura, honey. Go back to sleep. Sorry," she directed her attention back to the phone.

"It's okay. I'm just... I don't know what to do." But she certainly knew who she'd like to do. In fact, the thought of having Ryan LeJeune naked in her bed was the only one circling around in her mind.

"What's happening?"

"I think I just invited him back to my place for dessert," she sagged against the faux marble wall in the women's restroom. And, oh how she wanted him to come!

"This is a good thing. He's got to taste the product first, don't you think?"

"No, Amanda. I invited him back for *dessert*."

"Oh," her voice was filled with realization a half second before she erupted into laughter.

"This is so not funny."

"Yes it is. Beat you at your own game, huh? Did you wear the low cut red dress? The one with the slit up to your neck?"

Laura cursed her reflection in the long mirror. "Yes."

"Then what did you expect? He's a man, Laura. And you're a pretty hot package."

"I didn't expect this. What do I do?"

"Is he cute?"

"Come on, be serious." He was a LeJeune, after all.

"I am. Is he cute?"

"I don't know. If you cross Johnny Depp with Brad Pitt and throw in a touch of Cajun charm do you get cute?" Cute didn't even begin to cover what Ryan was. More like sexy, sinful, oh God, what had she gotten herself into?

"I'm fanning myself right now. Oh my God. Cuter than Blake?"

"Blake who?" Blake was known as the better looking of the two.

"Damn. That's pretty cute."

"So? What do I do?"

"Well, first of all, you either have to let him taste the ice cream or, uh, let him taste

the ice cream." Her meaning on the last was clear. And it had nothing to do with what was in her freezer at home.

"You're no help."

"What did you expect? Nail him. Don't nail him. Whatever. Just remember to get the sweet stuff."

"Amanda? Amanda?" Damn. Laura folded the phone back up and put it in her bag. *Breathe. He's just a man.*

Laura knew she wasn't exactly an expert on the topic of men. Sure, she'd had her share of lovers, but none who even came close to her fantasy about Ryan. And none who seemed able to tolerate her or her company for very long. In the end, all of them had been disappointments, which was, no pun intended, how the ice cream came about in the first place. Oh, she may look like sin itself if she tried hard enough, but she wasn't as confident when it came to men as she liked to let on. And in the past few years, too many men had been intimidated once they found out about the ice cream. They didn't want to be one-upped by fudge ripple.

Ryan didn't seem intimidated by this little game. In fact, he played right into it. Which could lead to all sorts of fun if she would just let herself go and have a good time with this. There could be worse fates than going into business with someone who looked like that.

She noticed he sat up a little straighter when she returned. *Well, that makes one of us*, she thought. "Sorry about that."

"No problem. Are you done here?"

"Sure. If you are, I mean." If he kept looking at her like she was now a menu item, she would... well, she wasn't sure what she would do. But she sure as hell knew what she wanted to do. And it was sitting right across from her.

"I think I am. I'm actually quite ready to go back to your place and taste this ice cream I've heard so much about."

Laura moved a few steps ahead of him, hoping the distance would clear her mind. Hoping a reason why he shouldn't go home with her came to mind. "I think I'm fresh out of ice cream," she finally managed as he led her to the restaurant door.

"I find that hard to believe," he pushed the door open for her. "Where's your car? I'll be sure you get settled in."

Laura ignored the twinge of disappointment washing over her when he didn't press the ice cream issue. "It's up here. Nice Porsche," she indicated as she walked by his car.

"It's mine," he beamed.

"Figures," she said under her breath. As fast as the driver. "Well, this is me."

"Volvo. How practical. Not what I'd expect from someone who makes orgasm ice cream."

"This is going to be a problem for you, isn't it?" she folded her arms.

Ryan moved toward her and pinned her against the car. "Now why would I care?" he said softly. "You're gonna make us both rich."

"Most men don't like to compete with dairy products." She avoided his eyes, feeling his fingers burn into her bare skin, knowing he had the power to melt her with just one touch. Her ice cream didn't stand a chance. Neither did her body. "I'm not most men," he pressed in closer, spreading his legs to keep his balance as he dipped his head in to hers. He barely brushed her lips, but she felt the sizzle all the way to her toes. Damn

him; he ended the kiss just as she leaned into him. "You taste like sugar," he teased.

Laura splayed her hands across his chest, hoping to push him away, but instead found herself just resting them there. His chest was rock hard beneath the silk of the shirt. She fought the urge to push the fabric to the side and dive in for a taste of bare flesh. "I didn't come here for this," she managed.

"I think you did. A girl doesn't dress like that and throw out sexual comments unless she intends to seduce. So, are you going to admit it or not?" He ran his finger along her bottom lip.

"Admit what?" That she wanted him? Right here, right now in the parking lot? To hell with the business deal. She bit her lip.

"Admit that you are trying to tease the sugar out of me."

She nodded slowly. He didn't know the half of it. And the worst part was, in spite of the kiss, he was probably just teasing.

"Good. Then tomorrow night. Your place. No teasing. No seduction. Strictly business." He tipped her nose with his finger before releasing her. "We'll settle the contract after I taste the product," he said in his best strictly business voice.

"Fine. We'll do it your way." Maybe.

All he wanted was to hear that he controlled the situation. For the first time tonight, he thought he might. Hell, since the first time today. As he watched Laura's light gray Volvo drive off, he remembered that his house was cold and dark. It would have been so much better to go home with her and snuggle up after a pint of ice cream.

* * * * *

Laura flipped through her *365 Reasons Chocolate is Better than Men* calendar. Reason number 165. Melts in your mouth, not in your hand. The Mars Company really had a winner with that logo. That, combined with the urban legends about the green M&Ms, was enough to keep people coming back for more. Plus, they made damned good chocolate.

She laughed at reason 173. Chocolate doesn't promise to call you tomorrow. How many times had she heard that line from men? Very few of them called, and the ones who did never stayed around for long. At first, she thought they were intimidated by her degrees, her intelligence. Nope, it was the ice cream. It had been ever since she created it.

Guys who drove Porsches shouldn't need to validate their manhood. Their cars did that for them. But after meeting Ryan LeJeune tonight, she knew that he would be the kind to head for the hills as soon as she challenged his manhood. And she would.

A slow smile spread across her lips as she thought of how fun it would be to bring a man like Ryan LeJeune to his knees. Women everywhere would thank her for taking him down a notch or two. And she had to admit it would be a boost for her ego, too.

She scribbled in a note on the calendar for tomorrow. Not that she'd forget her meeting with Ryan. Meeting. That was one way to put it. Something in those blue eyes warned her there was a potential for more than just shop talk. And, oh, how she wanted more!

She pulled the silver canister from her pocket. He slipped it to her before helping

her into her car. As she dipped her finger into the sweet powder, she wondered about those blue eyes again. She could practically picture them smoldering over with desire, a wicked gleam shining down at her. Or up at her. Either way, she wanted him in a way she couldn't even define yet. He did something to her in their hour or so together that she hadn't expected and she really wanted to experience it again. She wanted to feel the power he gave her just by being in his presence. More than that, she wanted him to want her as badly as she lusted after him.

Of course, there was more to her fascination than just lust. Sure, he was devilishly handsome. And interested in this deal. If he hadn't been, he wouldn't have given her a sample of the product. She battled with herself over the sample. It was a sign of trust on his part to hand it over without a decision having been reached. But it could also be a ploy to drive the negotiations in another direction, one which would give him more control than she'd like.

She eyed the container again, the desire to create a new flavor overwhelming the desire to second-guess Ryan. Testing a new flavor took a week after she had the chemistry worked out. She had twenty-four flavors already. She wanted something new for this product. Something that would knock everyone's socks off. And then some.

What did her customers want? She tapped her bottom lip with her finger. She knew what they wanted. That wasn't the problem. The problem was trying to figure out a new way to package it. She needed a flavor that screamed sex. Something that tasted heavenly. Something that tasted forbidden. She could add it to the new fudge ripple, but that didn't seem right. This needed something new.

Banana split. With chocolate sauce. That would be enough to challenge Ryan's ego. She could see the package now. A nice, large banana on the front. She wouldn't sleep tonight.

Chapter Three

Ryan rolled out of bed, frustrated by the heat. July in Louisiana was damned hot. If the electric company didn't get the air conditioning turned on soon, he'd have to start sleeping at the mill. Of course, it hadn't helped that he'd dreamed about ice cream all night. And other things.

Laura Reynolds had always been one of the smart girls. The kind the boys in his crowd knew were out of their league. He could look but couldn't touch. She hadn't dated much in high school. And when she had, the boys hadn't been from Oak Creek. He wondered why a woman so determined to get away from here had hung around. And why he had bailed.

He kept insisting to himself it was his desire to do things on his own. After the divorce, he wanted a fresh start. Part of it had to do with going somewhere where no one had heard the nasty details of his divorce. Gina had pulled out every bit of dirty laundry she could find. And when she realized there wasn't nearly enough, she began making things up. Of course, everyone believed her stories. Everyone in town knew the LeJeune boys had an eye for the ladies. And the ladies always looked back.

In the end, Ryan took what he thought was the high road and left town. He sold his share of the company to Blake, split his inheritance with Gina and booked it to New Orleans as fast as he could.

He ambled through the house and turned on the shower, thankful for the cool water.

At least he could cool off here. But the water brought his mind back around to the ice cream. Which brought him back to Laura. She had green eyes like Angelina Jolie. Lips like her, too. But that hair. The hair was sinful angel hair. Buttery blond with wisps of caramel. Now there's an ice cream flavor, he thought.

Ryan was already sporting a semi-hard-on thanks to those luscious dreams about Laura's curvy body. Cold showers were meant to destroy a hard-on. Not this one. It only made him wonder how his dick would feel slipping inside of her after rubbing ice cream all over her body. That was the only way ice cream could cause an orgasm.

His cock fully sprang to life at the thought. Laura. He wanted to fuck her until she screamed his name. He wanted those candy colored fingernails digging into his back, rubbing his balls, teasing his dick. He wanted to watch them dip inside her wet warmth and then go into his mouth.

He had masturbated so many times it was second nature. But this time, his stroking was even more intense. Hazy green eyes rose up from the shower and then dipped lower, taking him into her lush mouth. As he stroked, he imagined her tongue washing over him. Cold from the ice cream. Wet. Hard.

He fell against the wall as his dick shot its load. Laura. What the fuck? He could go again. This was no damned good. And unfucking funny.

He toweled off, groaning at the beads of sweat collecting on his skin as he moved through the house. Opening a window wouldn't even help in this heat. All it would do was move the hot air around, making it hard to think. It was hard enough to do that with thoughts of tonight's meeting fresh in his mind.

He dressed casually, jeans and T-shirt and stuck his wallet into his pocket. He fingered his hands through his curly dark hair and then placed his cowboy hat on top of the still damp mess. There was one thing about having curly hair in the South. It was always unruly. He grumbled, wishing he didn't have a renewed interest in his hair. Wishing the reason for the interest would stop undressing herself in his mind. He had too much work to do today to spend it thinking about her.

* * * * *

"I want the dish. All of it." Laura looked up to see Amanda standing in the doorway of the lab, her eyes beaming.

"I see someone woke up in a good mood this morning." Laura lowered her glasses and peered at her sister, hoping she didn't look as hot and bothered as she felt. All morning the only thing on her mind had been Ryan and his sexy eyes, his deep voice, his long legs. Having him covered in ice cream and... That reminded her about the missing ice cream. "Did you at least bring the ice cream back?"

"I didn't take it all," Amanda argued. "Then where is it?" Laura had looked everywhere for Fudge Ripple #9 this morning and hadn't been able to find it.

"Maybe you should ask Cate. She was the last one here last night."

"I did. She said she hadn't seen it."

"Well, you know they didn't eat it all. They always lay waste to the first batch, but save enough for the samples. Enough about the ice cream. Tell me about Ryan." Amanda took a stool opposite Laura, who hoped she wouldn't comment about the

pristine white kitchen, which was usually in disarray. A clean kitchen was usually a sign that Laura had been thinking too much. And she didn't want Amanda to know what she had been thinking about.

"Nothing to tell," Laura turned her head back to the numbers she had been looking over. Nothing except one quick kiss and a night full of wildly erotic dreams.

"Then why's the kitchen so clean? And why are you in here doing paperwork? Convenient in case you get some inspiration? Or need some?"

"There's nothing to tell," she insisted, still not meeting Amanda's eyes. Ice cream sex. Sex in the Porsche. Sex on the Porsche. Shit, she was getting hot!

"You're not even gonna try to lie, are you?"

Laura put her pen down and folded her arms. "What do you want to know?"

"Is he as sexy with his clothes off?"

"I wouldn't know." But she had thought about the image all night long, and it was enough to guarantee there was more to the man than just legend.

"Don't tell me you didn't take him home! You called me in the middle of...well, you called me and then you want me to believe you didn't take him home for the promised dessert?"

"I didn't." But she sure as hell planned to. Last night taught her one thing. Take control. Seize life. And right now, she wanted to seize a handful of Ryan LeJeune.

"But you're gonna, right?"

"I have work to do. I'm meeting Ryan tonight and..."

"Ah-ha! So you are planning on it. No, don't try to hide it." She held up a hand to quiet Laura's protest. "So, what flavor are you gonna use? You are gonna seduce him, right?"

"I think you and I both know that Ryan LeJeune can't be seduced." *It sure as hell doesn't hurt to try.*

"What do you mean can't be? He's been with half of Oak Creek."

"That's exactly what I mean. Do you think those women seduced him? Uh-uh. They probably just laid it out on the table for him. Here, have a scoop of this, big boy." She mockingly wiggled her chest and used her best Mae West impression.

"He's still good looking, huh?"

"Sin on a stick." Luscious, yummy. A thousand other descriptions came to mind.

"Hey, that's it!" Amanda snapped her fingers.

"What's it?"

"The name for the line of popsicles. *Sin on a stick.*"

Laura wrinkled her nose. "I thought we were going to keep the names clean." Even if the owner keeps thinking dirty thoughts.

"I know you didn't like *Pops Your Cherry* for the cherry fudge swirl, but I like this one."

"Well, I don't. It indicates that people will be doing perverted stuff with the ice cream." Like she had in her dreams last night. Like she wanted to do tonight.

Amanda laughed. "You think they don't?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't, do you? You think they just eat the stuff. Let me tell you, you're missing out." She slapped her hands on the counter.

"What are you suggesting?" Laura chewed on the end of her ink pen, this new suggestion was one she hadn't thought of before. Well, before Ryan.

"You know what I'm suggesting. These women don't use the ice cream to replace

sex. They use it to enhance sex."

"Oh, God. I don't want to hear this," she covered her ears, embarrassed that she'd done the same thing last night in her sleep. And woke up from a hell of a wet dream.

"Laura," Amanda forced her hands down. "You are leading a sexual revolution here. Be proud."

"Proud that I'm contributing to lewd behavior with dairy products?" She tried to sound sarcastic, but was afraid she was going off the deep end.

"No. Proud that you're giving women the freedom to take control of their sexuality."

"They didn't need my permission."

"No, but they sure as hell need the ice cream." She winked.

"About the ice cream, where's the fudge ripple?" She hoped having Amanda on the subject of sex would convince her to tell the truth about the missing ice cream.

"I'm the marketing director, right?"

"Yes." She didn't like where this was heading.

"So let me market," she shrugged.

"What did you do?" She knew her sister's avoidance meant she was up to something.

"I sent some over to Ryan. No, I know what you're thinking," she raised her hands to quiet Laura.

"You have no idea what I'm thinking," she slapped Amanda's hands out of the way. "You sent him the test batch?"

"You've got the formula, right?"

"Of course I've got the formula. That isn't the point." Ryan had her ice cream! She wasn't ready for this yet.

"You know, poor Ryan's lights are off. It must be awfully hot in that big ol' house. I thought he could use it," she shrugged.

"I know that look in your eyes. There's something you're not telling me."

"Well, there is one thing," a wicked grin spread across her face. "You know Nick and I took some of it home last night, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I think you created the first his and hers ice cream flavor." "What do you mean?" she narrowed her eyes at her sister.

"I mean, it got him hot." She winked.

"Wait a minute. You're telling me fudge ripple got Nick hot and *you sent some to Ryan?*" Holy freaking shit! She had to stop Ryan. The last thing she needed was Ryan with a hard-on. She may be forced to remedy the situation. Damn, damn, damn.

"Yeah. I did."

"Marketing my ass," Laura mumbled, grabbing her keys and purse.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get the ice cream back."

* * * * *

Ryan opened the door only to be greeted by a petite blond in short denim shorts and a halter-top. *Welcome home*, he thought to himself. She held a large brown box in one

hand and the other was raised, about to knock.

"Well, Ryan LeJeune. It's a good thing you're home," she smiled.

"Yeah, I'm home." He mentally ran through a list of the women in Oak Creek and came up empty. He didn't know this one. Of course, she looked to be about eighteen.

"I'm Cate Reynolds. Laura's cousin."

"Oh, Cate. Wow, you sure grew up." *Down boy. She's barely legal.*

"Well, you've been gone a while," she smiled.

"I was on my way out," he began.

"Oh, well this will only take a minute. This is for you," she held out the box. "Laura wanted it sent right over this morning. Said you should try it right away," she winked.

"She did, did she?" Ryan took the box and ran a hand along the top edge. It was a plain brown box with *I Scream Ice Cream* marked on the top. Nothing fancy there.

"Yep. I gotta get going. I have orders to fill today."

"Okay. Thanks." He watched her skip down the steps and get into a bright red Mustang. Whew, they sure could grow 'em here in Oak Creek.

Ryan's first impulse was to put the ice cream in the freezer. Of course, thanks to Blake, the freezer wasn't working right now. And if he didn't get into town soon, he wouldn't have lights any time this century. But Laura sent over the ice cream. Which meant one of two things. First, she wanted to cancel their date tonight. Or, second, this was a preview before the main event.

He laughed to himself and went inside in search of a spoon. No sense letting good orgasm ice cream go to waste.

He kicked open the screen door, deciding the front porch was cooler than the house. He practically ripped open the box containing a plain white carton of ice cream labeled *Fudge Ripple #9*. That old song *Love Potion #9* crossed his mind as he peeled off the plastic top and dug the spoon in. The cool creamy scoop had barely passed his lips when he heard the voice.

"Don't eat that!" Laura was clearly out of breath and standing on the bottom step.

"Eat what?" He took in the spoonful and smiled, thinking he'd rather take in a spoonful of her.

"Great, just great." She climbed up the steps, obviously flustered by what she had witnessed.

"Damn good ice cream," he licked his lips. "Want some?" he held the carton out to her and then snatched it away when she tried to take it. "Uh-uh. Gotta say please first," he teased, liking the idea of having her beg.

"Give me that," she reached for it again, only to have him hold it above his head. She had two options, she could leave him alone and let him eat the stuff or she could climb up his chest and take it from him. Ryan welcomed the latter.

"Is it poison or something?"

"No."

"Then it's mine. You sent it over."

"No, I didn't. My sister did."

"How is Amanda, anyway?"

"Fine. Look, give me the ice cream."

"No." He half expected her to tackle him for it, by the look in her eyes. Instead, she stood there, arms folded, as if she could talk the carton away from him. Fat chance of

that. If she wanted it so badly, he was determined to eat it.

"You don't know..." she trailed off.

"I don't know what? How to handle it? I'm a big boy, Laura. I think I can manage to eat your orgasm ice cream and contain myself," he let his voice drop as he spoke, knowing his voice usually had a magical touch with the ladies. If her shiver was any indication, he still had it.

"You've been warned."

"Come join me," he headed for the porch swing. "Maybe we could share." Visions from his shower flooded his brain. A cold ice cream flavored mouth on his dick. His hard-on was back with a vengeance and threatening to blow his cool cover.

She stared after him. It only took two strides for him to reach the swing and casually sit down. He took another big spoonful into his mouth and licked the remainder off the spoon, being sure to dart his tongue out as he did. He watched her green eyes darken. Oh, yeah. She wanted him. And he wanted nothing more than to lick ice cream from her spoon.

She shook her head. "I don't want any."

"Shame. It sure is good. In fact, I think I'm gonna come right now." He threw his head back and let out a howl.

"You're funny, LeJeune. Now give me the ice cream."

He laughed, a full belly laugh. "You should see yourself. You don't get out much, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're all worked up over losing a carton of ice cream. I think," he pointed the spoon at her, "that it's been so long since you've had a real orgasm you don't know what to do with yourself."

"My sex life is none of your concern," she folded her arms, tried to sound tough. Ryan could see right through it. Her seduction act last night had been smoke and mirrors. The CEO of the orgasm ice cream company hadn't gotten any lately. If her customers found out, it could ruin her business.

"You've been figured out, lady." Placing the ice cream carton on the swing, he took two steps back to her and stood over her, arms folded, a challenge in waiting. To kiss her or not to kiss her? He'd only had a tiny taste last night. Now that he figured out her secret, he wanted a lot more. Inching toward her, he watched as she backed away a little with each step he took. "Two more steps and you'll fall off the porch," he warned.

She shot him a dirty look. "You're awfully full of yourself."

"Nope. Right now, I'm full of orgasm ice cream. Tell me, Laura, how does it make you feel? Is it a long orgasm? Multiple? Or just enough to take the edge off?" He watched her eyes flicker. "That's it. It just takes the edge off. So, the question is, how long have you been replacing sex with ice cream? How long have you been walking around on the edge?"

She put her hands up against his chest, holding him back. He cornered her against the porch railing. When she looked up into his eyes, he saw the answer right there. Too damned long. She didn't speak, didn't protest as he lowered his head to her. Instead, she raised up to meet his kiss. And floored him with that tiny motion.

Ryan pulled her into him the way he wanted to since he first saw her last night. Laura Reynolds. She smelled like sugar, tasted like sugar. But she wasn't a no-calorie,

no-fat substitute. She was the real thing. And she was moaning into his mouth, writhing against him. And he was hard as a rock.

He lifted her against him, wanting her heat pressed up against his hardness. Her hands were in his hair now, which was damp from the heat rather than the cold shower. If he were lucky, he wouldn't need a cold shower again. To hell with his talk of nobility. To hell with his declared celibacy. Bring on the whipped cream!

He let her pull his mouth against hers harder, firmer. God, it must have been a long time for her. He felt all of her passion seep into his body from the way she clung to him to the way she welcomed him inside. Making love to her would be an experience he knew he'd never forget. If he could get her that far. Right now, that was the only thing on his mind, getting her into bed. That and the fact that the earth seemed to be spinning beneath him.

Only it wasn't the earth. They were falling. Recognition dawned on him. The porch railing had give way and they were crashing to the ground. Using his reflexes, Ryan managed to turn them so he landed on the ground, breaking her fall. She fell against him with a thud and scrambled to stand up.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine," she shot back.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

He laughed then. They must have been a hell of a sight, falling off his porch that

way. He picked up his now dirty cowboy hat and replaced it on his head and watched as she tried to wipe the grass stains from the knees of her jeans. "That's some ice cream."

She glared down at him. "I have to go."

"You sure you don't want to take it inside? I promise not to break anything else."

She continued to glare. "I'll just take what's left of the ice cream, and I'll be going. Before you hurt yourself," she shot over her shoulder as she went back up the porch steps and grabbed her carton. His laugh followed her all the way to the porch.

Great. She turned the key in the ignition. She just made a huge fool of herself. First, she came to reclaim her ice cream, then she ended up kissing the man. Then, as if kissing him weren't bad enough, she broke his porch. He must think she was some kind of sex-starved maniac. She cursed herself, knowing he probably thought she had used the ice cream as a front in order to come over and throw herself at him. And then break the damned porch. She really blew it this time.

She made a mental note to kill her sister and anyone else involved in today's fiasco. And she swore she'd never tell any of them about it. She broke the man's porch. She hoped to hell it was because the railing was already shot and not because of those ten extra pounds. She wouldn't be able to face Ryan LeJeune again.

She pulled out of his driveway hoping she could find another sugar supplier. This one wasn't going to work. Not now and not ever. No matter how completely tempting he was.

She couldn't help but glance back through the rear view mirror. He was dusting off his cowboy hat. And laughing. Still. Well, at least she amused him. She swallowed hard. She should have learned a long time ago that amusement was all girls like her could be to

guys like him. Nothing serious. Just distraction.

Chapter Four

Something was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong! And it wasn't the heat. And it wasn't the fact that he was broke. And it wasn't the damned ice cream. Ice cream *could not* cause an orgasm. He didn't care how much money *I Scream* made last year, it wasn't possible.

But Ryan wasn't having an orgasm. He was having... shit, he didn't know what he was having, but it wasn't an orgasm. Okay, so he couldn't concentrate on anything. Maybe he had that ADD he'd heard so much about lately. Maybe he was a late bloomer when it came to learning disorders.

No, it was the heat. Had to be. Nothing else could account for the light-headed feeling, as if all the blood were rushing to his... oh, God. He groaned. The heat, the heat, the heat. Had to be the heat.

He stood, banging his knee on the edge of his desk. He needed to concentrate. He made it to the bathroom, thankful it was attached to the office. His jeans were too tight. He flipped on the light and shut the door. The room was too small.

He ran the cold water in the sink and splashed some on his face. Get a grip, boy. That was when he realized what was happening. Oh, God, he had a raging hard-on. RAGING. The worst ever. It would have been the best had there been a willing hard body anywhere in sight. But, no. He was closed up in his daddy's office at the mill.

He unzipped his jeans. His penis painfully sprang forth. He looked down at the swollen purple head and tried to still his racing heart. All the oxygen in his body must have gone straight to his dick because he couldn't catch his breath. Then the image came. Laura naked. Laura spread out in front of him, smiling up at him. Oh, God, he could come in 2.3 seconds. Now he was glad there wasn't a willing hard body. What a disappointment he'd be!

He reached down to touch his throbbing penis. His whole body ached. This was not funny. Images of Laura continued to flash through his mind. Laura licking her lips. Laura in that low cut dress. Laura in those tight jeans. Laura pressed against him, moaning into his mouth. Falling on top of him. Her hair in his face.

Then he did something he hadn't done since he was thirteen. He came. Quickly. The orgasm ripped through his body. He hadn't even started stroking himself. He hadn't done anything. Except think of her.

Damn. This meant trouble. He braced himself on the sides of the porcelain sink. His breath was coming in short bursts. There was something wrong with him. Rather than relaxing as he'd hoped it would, his cock seemed to have a mind of its own and was primed and ready for action again.

The ice cream. No. That was impossible. There was no ice cream that could make *that* happen. He didn't even want to admit to what had happened. How emasculating. He took a deep breath. He would talk to her about this tonight. Like it or not, he was keeping their appointment.

He groaned as he wiped the come from his pants and washed his hands. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Ever. Not to a grown man. And not to a LeJeune. Hell, the stories about him may have only been stories, but when it was time to act, he knew what he was doing. And he did it at just the right time. None of that premature stuff for him. Nope.

Laura. She set him up for this. She knew there was something in his ice cream. And she knew if she came over and tried to stop him from eating it, he would do exactly the opposite. Women. They were all the same. Still, the ice cream couldn't have caused it alone. It was the heat.

Ice cream *cannot* cause a grown man to lose control. And it can't satisfy a woman. No matter what she thinks. It's all psycho something. Psychosomatic. That's it. He tried to zip his pants back. He finally had his throbbing cock packed away, but the jeans were still painfully tight. He opted for leaving them unzipped and kept his T-shirt out to cover his fly.

He'd go home and change into some sweatpants or something. And then he'd march over to Laura's house and give her a piece of his mind. His body reacted instantly to the thought of giving her a piece of something. And it wasn't his mind that he intended to share.

"Hey, Ryan." His head shot up. He hadn't expected anyone else to be here this evening. Giving himself one last glance in the mirror and taking a deep breath, he opened the bathroom door. And hoped he looked normal.

"Dusty. What brings you by?" He shoved his hands in his pockets to avoid shaking hands with his cousin.

"Aw, nothing much. Just seeing what you're up to. I heard your place is out of lights, so I thought I'd offer my couch." Dusty shot him a crooked grin.

"Oh. Thanks. They should be back on any day now." He motioned for Dusty to take a seat and then followed suit, trying to hide his discomfort at sitting while sporting a major hard-on.

"Well, the offer's open. Sorry I didn't warn you about the place and all."

"It's okay," he assured him. "I didn't realize Blake was in such a hurry to get out of here."

"Well, he wasn't till he hooked up with that model. She's a looker, but I wonder when she's gonna leave him high and dry. You haven't talked to him, have you?" Dusty seemed concerned.

"No. I haven't. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure where he's at. But I'm sure he'll call if he needs something."

"Well, the money's bound to run out. And when it does, he'll be back."

Just like me, Ryan thought. Of course, it hadn't happened quite the same way, but the truth was, both Ryan and Blake were running from the LeJeune legacy. He didn't blame his brother one bit for taking off. He did wish he had paid the light bill on the way out, though. "I'm sure Blake is fine."

"Me too. Look, it's late. I just wanted to offer the couch. So, if you change your mind..."

"No. I'll be fine. Thanks anyway."

"No prob. I'll see you around."

Ryan waited until Dusty left before locking up the office and heading home. Shooting an angry look at the refrigerator whose freezer compartment held what was left of *Fudge Ripple #9*, he groaned, all of his energy focusing on his still swollen dick. Then he smiled. Maybe tonight he'd give Laura some of her own medicine.

* * * * *

Laura wasn't expecting Ryan to show up on her doorstep. She had all but forgotten their meeting. She put it out of her mind earlier, having decided they'd both made big enough fools of themselves earlier today to call the whole thing off. And she decided she didn't need Ryan's sugar. She hoped he felt the same way.

That was the reason why she was truly surprised when she opened the door at seven o'clock to find him standing there, looking as if he'd gone a few rounds today.

"Ryan." One hand held a pint of ice cream. With the free one, she tugged on her blue bathrobe, trying to pull it closer to her body. "I wasn't expecting you."

"You and I had a meeting tonight, remember?" There was something unusual in those blue eyes tonight. All the humor she had seen earlier was gone, replaced with something deeper. Something that sent a shiver up her back.

"I, uh, didn't think you'd come." He straightened at her comment. She could have sworn she heard him let out a little groan.

"Well I did." His voice was softly seductive. That Southern drawl was the stuff of romances. Rhett Butler would be proud to have left a legacy of rogues in the South.

"I see that. You want to come in?" She moved to the side so he could enter. She tried not to think about the way he smelled as he brushed by her. He was a walking combination of sugar and musk. She closed her eyes and inhaled before looking at him again.

He practically filled up the doorway and looked largely out of place in her small entryway. She led him into the living room and watched him sink down onto her sofa. Her breath caught in her throat when she noted how at home he looked in his black sweatpants and New Orleans Saints T-shirt.

"I'm, uhm, going to go change. Then we can talk, okay?" She placed the container of ice cream on the coffee table before heading into the bedroom. He nodded his response, and she was gone before he had a chance to do anything more. Particularly mention that kiss earlier or the disastrous results thereof.

Laura fumbled with the zipper on her jeans. She really hadn't been prepared to see him. And she especially wasn't prepared for the suddenly smoldering look he wore tonight. He was so damned sexy. She realized she'd thought about little else since meeting him again yesterday. God, he was going to turn her brain to melted mush.

This was a bad situation. Especially since she was so attracted to him. Tonight he had abandoned the cowboy get up and looked as if he were ready for bed. He wore the sweats and a pair of tennis shoes. His hair was pulled back into a decent ponytail with a couple of loose strands falling across his forehead. He looked perfectly at ease but completely dangerous.

She pulled a white tank top over her head and then considered taking her hair down from its ponytail. Afraid of giving the impression that she cared about what he thought, she did the next best thing and rearranged the ponytail.

She also considered putting on a coat of makeup, but decided against it. She didn't care what he thought, she reminded herself. Well, a little powder never hurt anyone.

When she walked back into the living room, Ryan was examining the carton of ice cream she had placed on the table. She sat in the chair near the sofa, careful to avoid him.

"This the stuff you sent over today?" he didn't meet her eyes as he asked.

"I told you I didn't send that. And no, it's not."

"Humph." He turned the plain white carton over in his hands.

"I don't care if you believe me or not." She folded her arms and then slid her legs

underneath her so she was sitting on top of them. "I didn't say that." He pulled the spoon out and looked at the melting mess on it.

"So if I eat this, nothing will happen." "That's right." "And if you eat it, nothing will happen." "What are you getting at?" She let out an exasperated breath. He twisted in his seat. "I'm just asking if this is some more of the famous orgasm ice cream." "The ice cream isn't for men," she argued. "It isn't." He didn't ask. "No, it isn't. Now, why are you here?" "I'm here because of the sugar." He replaced the spoon and focused his attention on

her. Those blue eyes shot through her, causing her to wrap her arms around her body. "Okay, then. About the sugar. Are you gonna sell it to me or not?" "You haven't had time to see if it will stabilize."

"It will. I have my first batch in the freezer as we speak. It will take about a week with testing to be sure the flavor is just what I want and to be sure it will stabilize. But I have faith in it."

"I'm sure you do. What's the new flavor?"

Heat spread across her chest. She didn't want to admit to the flavor, as it only conjured up images of those dreams she'd been having. "Banana split with fudge sauce." She tried to keep a straight face as she watched his expression change. She swore she heard him moan.

"I liked the ice cream from today. And I'm here to sample more of what you have to offer." He spoke bluntly, clenching and unclenching his fist.

"Are you okay tonight? You seem tense."

"I'm fine."

"Okay. I have a couple more flavors in the freezer, but none of them are quite like what you had today." She stood and turned toward the kitchen. She heard him behind her.

"I have no doubt about that."

She flipped on the light of her kitchen. She loved this room the most. It wasn't like her lab. The decor resembled a fifties ice cream parlor, reflecting Laura's love for her product.

"Have a seat," she directed, ducking behind the soda shop bar she'd had installed. Ryan took a seat on one of the silver bar stools.

"This is different," he commented, letting his gaze wander over the pictures of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. A tiny tabletop jukebox sat on the bar.

"I like it," she shrugged.

"This thing work?" He flipped through the songs on the jukebox.

"Yep. Bought it on eBay. It plays CDs, though. Not as authentic as it looks."

"The ice cream parlor is, though. Right down to the glass top freezer."

"Ice cream is my passion. So, what flavor would you like?" She leaned over the counter, unaware that she gave Ryan a clear view of cleavage.

"You," he leaned forward, took her ponytail in his hands and pulled her to him.

Even though the bar separated their bodies, the heat coming from him was enough to make her breath catch in her throat. She could get used to this man's lips. And that

was not a good thing. Her hands gripped the counter, and she tried to pull away, but her body resisted, forcing her to lean into the kiss even more.

"Ryan." She finally caught her breath and broke the kiss.

"I'm sorry. I'm not myself today."

"I know. And I'm the one who's sorry." She backed away from the bar and out of his arms.

"What are you sorry about?" confusion flashed across his face as he sat back down on the barstool. "The ice cream from earlier. I should have told you the truth." "It *was* poisoned."

"No. It wasn't poisoned. It was... well, it was different from the rest. I don't know how, but I managed to put together something that has the same effect on men as it does on women."

"Bullshit."

"I'm serious." She folded her arms. "I know you, the great Ryan LeJeune, don't

believe me, but it's true. Amanda tried it out last night and said it works on men." "Then why didn't it work on me?" She chewed at her bottom lip. It didn't work on him? "It didn't?" "No." "Then how do you explain the kiss today? The one just now?" "Who knows. But it wasn't ice cream." She smiled. "So, you're saying you're attracted to me." "You're a beautiful woman. And that tank top is see through." She wrapped her arms even tighter around herself, causing her cleavage to shoot up then let out a frustrated gasp at the results before dropping her arms. "It's the ice cream." "It's not the ice cream. Why did you kiss me back?" With him looking at her like she was on the menu, it was difficult to keep her mind on anything other than the kiss. "Isn't that obvious?" "No."

"Do I have to spell it out for you? It's the ice cream. You were right, okay? I eat a lot of it. And it does tend to put me on edge. So there. It had nothing to do with you." She opened the glass-topped freezer. "Now, really, what flavor do you want?"

He let a slow smile spread across his face. "What have you got?"

"Cherry chocolate fudge, Dutch chocolate, chocolate chip and mint chocolate. I

have a little bit of chocolate mocha left. Enough for a taste. So, what's your poison?" "All chocolate." "Yes. That's where the chemical is. In the chocolate." "The chemical?" "The one that simulates orgasm." "Oh. Well, I guess I'll try the cherry stuff then.

Surely you have creative names for

them. You know, like *Get Your Rocks off Rocky Road*?" "Amanda wanted to have, uh, creative names. I nixed the idea. I just call 'em what they taste like."

"I bet you do," he mumbled.

"Here," she handed him a paper cup with a scoop of the cherry chocolate fudge ice cream in it and brought the ice cream scoop to her lips to lick off the excess. Before she could taste it, he stopped her hand in mid motion.

"None for you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't believe you about this ice cream."

"You're not making any sense."

"Give me a minute." He took a spoonful of the ice cream into his mouth. "It's good."

"Damn straight."

He moaned. "Real good. In fact, I think I'm gonna come just thinking about it."

"Would you stop teasing? It doesn't work on men. The one from today was different."

"I told you nothing happened today."

"Yeah. You did. I don't believe you." She watched him continue to insert the spoon into the ice cream and then lick the frozen treat from it. His movements made her wonder how it would feel to be an ice cream cone.

"Believe what you want," he finally said with a shrug. "This is a nice set up you've got here."

"I like it." She turned to the soda fountain and fixed herself a cherry coke before sitting back down.

"You wanna know why I said no more ice cream?" He took in the last bite as he spoke.

"No."

"I said it because I want to know what happens tonight isn't ice cream induced."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about our deal. I want to know that you aren't just trying to get a hold of my sugar so you can get a hold of the cane." He waggled his eyebrows.

"You don't have to be so crude. And you're awfully cocky, aren't you?"

"Damn straight."

She flushed all the way to her ears. "I didn't mean..."

"I know what you meant, darlin'. And I am in every sense of the word. Now, about our deal."

"I'm listening."

"I want to taste the product before I agree to anything."

"Done."

"And I want to help develop new flavors."

"As long as they're within reason. And necessary."

"And I want to have wild, uninhibited sex with you."

Laura stared at him as if he'd lost his mind when the last comment slipped out. He had fought this raging hard-on the best he could all night. But it was driving him crazy. All of the blood from his brain seemed to have a direct line to his dick. That was the only explanation for such an absurd suggestion.

The plan formulated even if he had lost what little control he had to begin with tonight. And now, she licked her lips at the mention of the word sex. Those firm, full, red lips. The ones he dreamed about last night. The ones he wanted wrapped firmly around his cock.

"You're out of your mind."

"That I am. And you put me there. So how 'bout it?"

"You're out of your mind," she repeated.

"You said that already. You need to come up with a better reply than that if you

plan to scare me off."

"First of all, I didn't do anything to put you in any kind of... whatever it is going on in that head of yours."

"Actually it's going on in the other head. And I'm talking about today. You coming to see me to rescue your precious ice cream. I don't believe in orgasm producing ice cream. So, here's my plan. You have sex with me for the next week. Let me prove to you that no ice cream can replace a man's touch. And if you're still convinced that it can, I'll give you exclusive rights to the sugar."

Her eyes widened and then narrowed. "You're nuts."

"Yep. I'm pretty sure I am. I think it's the heat. So, do we have a deal?"

"No. There is no deal."

"Do you have a boyfriend or something?" He raised his hand when she started to speak. "Of course you don't. If you had a real man in your life you wouldn't need the ice cream orgasm. You'd have the real thing."

"My sex life is none of your concern."

"Seems you've said that before. So, how about it?"

"You can keep your damned sugar. What are you doing?"

"I'm coming to kiss you." He cornered her behind the bar. Her hands came up against his chest as he pulled her into him.

"Get away from me."

"If you really want me to, I will," he said softly.

"Ryan."

"I've had this all damned day," he ground his hips against hers. "Now, if you don't want me to kiss you, I won't. If you don't want to sleep with me, I'll leave. But think about it. You could have something that ice cream can't give you. You could have something that few men on earth could give you. Long, lingering, honest to God orgasms."

"No wonder I never dated you in high school."

"I'm not interested in dating. I'm interested in sex. You, me, two hot, sweaty bodies sliding off each other." Ryan LeJeune. Sexy as hell, sin on a stick Ryan LeJeune just offered to give her real, honest to God orgasms. Willingly. For one week. And then she would have exclusive rights to his sugar. Without the sweet deal, it was still a *sweet* deal.

She had dreamed about Ryan for years but would never admit it to anyone. She had watched him throughout high school and wondered how it would feel to have those arms wrapped around her and those lips on her body. Now she knew. And she had turned him down. Yep, she was certifiable.

It's just sex. She bit her bottom lip as she let her eyes graze over him.

Tall. Lean. Muscular. Tanned. Blue eyes. Long, curly dark hair. Those lips. She knew how they tasted with her ice cream on his lips. He could be an ice cream model. She could create a whole new career for him. Women would pay to taste the flavors on his lips.

She gave herself a shake. Yep. She was mental. A couple of kisses and she was ready to crown him some kind of sex god. And she knew he would be. Ryan LeJeune was legendary in Oak Creek. Which was exactly why she wanted to turn him down. At least that's what she told herself. She didn't want to be just another on a long list.

Still, there was a lot to be said for that mouth.

She took in a deep breath and then crossed the few inches to where he stood, staring at her, awaiting an answer. "Okay. You wanna play that way? You've got a deal."

Chapter Five

Laura knew a hell of a lot about ice cream, but men were an eternal mystery. Ryan practically stumbled backward as she took control of the situation and shoved him back against the bar. The look in his eyes said it all. He was bluffing. And she had made a complete fool out of herself. She watched him scramble for the door, mumbling some kind of apology and then leaving her standing there like an idiot. Good riddance.

Laura managed to put off thinking about Ryan during the short commute the next morning. She didn't think about those lips on hers or the way his body had felt pressed against her. And she certainly didn't think about his proposition. Or the fact that he had her right where he wanted her and left her there.

After a restless night filled with every fantasy she could summon, she knew there was no denying the chemistry between them. And Laura knew all about chemistry. It was a reaction in the blood, the brain, the hormones that nothing to do with real emotion, and was almost as fake as her simulated orgasms. Lust could convince you that you loved someone. Just like her ice cream could con the brain into orgasmic bliss.

Just like Ryan LeJeune could make a woman believe he wanted her only to leave her high and dry ten seconds later.

She pulled her car into her regular parking space, hoping to avoid her sister and cousins and all their questions. Pushing open the door to her office, she was welcomed by her haven, which was decorated in pale ice cream colors. The cotton candy pink sofa looked like heaven set against the mint ice cream colored walls and candy blue carpet. The festive setting clashed enough to give a normal person a headache from sensory overload.

Something was off, though, and it reeked of her disastrous night. Taking a deep breath, she peeled the label from the brown box sitting innocently on her desk. Ryan LeJeune was apparently up for round two. He'd fully humiliated her last night with round one, making her ready to give up on the whole idea of doing business with him.

Ripping open the box, she saw the plastic bag lying on top of shredded newspaper, looking like an illegal drug. She picked up the attached note and, holding it between shaky fingers, hoped her heart would stop beating out of control.

Sorry. Try Again? R

She replaced the note and shoved her hands into her back pockets, rocking on her heels. Thinking. Try what again? How long had she known Ryan LeJeune? And how many times had she let him get to her? There would be no second chances. No matter what.

That decided, she grabbed the box and headed for the lab. She'd show him! The ice cream mixture came together with no problems. Ryan's conversion chart precisely detailed just how much was needed.

"Somebody's in a sour mood this morning." Amanda stood in the doorway of the lab.

"Remind me to get a lock for that door," Laura grumbled.

"Cate said she thought you were in here sulking."

"I'm not sulking."

"Then what are you up to?" Amanda eyed the mixing bowl in Laura's hands.

"Mixing."

"I can see that. What are you mixing?"

"Well, when I came in today, I had a package on my desk." She nodded toward the open box on the counter.

Amanda picked up the note. "Sorry. Try again?" She wrinkled her brows. "Try what?"

"You don't want to know."

"He wanted more money?"

Laura shot her an incredulous look. "No."

"Then what?"

"He wanted to help with the flavors."

"Is that what this is all about?" Amanda's look said she didn't believe her sister's story.

"I'm mixing up a vanilla bean concoction like what I used for *Fudge Ripple* #9. It has to be the combination of vanilla and chocolate." Anything to change the topic.

"So it worked on Ryan?"

"Not even. At least that's what he says."

"And you don't believe him?"

"Nope. Not a word of it."

"Hmmm." Amanda took one of the wooden barstools and pulled it up to the counter, examining Ryan's note again. "And he wants you to make more of it?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what does he want?"

Laura avoided Amanda's inquiring gaze. If she looked at her sister, Amanda would figure out her secret. She was hot for Ryan. "Nothing."

"Your face is flushing. What exactly did you two do last night to warrant," she looked into the box, "three pounds of sugar substitute?"

"We didn't *do* anything."

"No, but I bet you wanted to."

Laura dumped the bowl onto the counter, having beaten all the lumps out of it she possibly could. "He wants to trade sex for sugar."

"Well hell," Amanda slapped her hand on the counter, "that sounds like a pretty cheap deal."

"Cheap is right." Laura rolled her eyes.

"And he's waiting for an answer? You didn't jump his bones then and there?"

"No, I didn't. Some of us have self control." Namely, him. "But you're gonna, right?"

"You're impossible."

"No, I'm not. I just know a sweet deal when I hear one."

"I suppose you'd do it, right?"

"If I weren't married and were interested in Ryan, yep, I'd do it."

"I'm not interested in Ryan."

"So you've said about a zillion times. If you're not interested, just tell him. Screw the renegotiations. You know what I mean," she added when Laura shot her a dirty look at her word choice.

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Then do it. Tell him the original offer stands with the modification that he can help

with flavors." Amanda dipped her finger into the new mixture. "This is good."

"It's got raw eggs in it."

"Figures," she coughed.

"Thought I'd warn you." Laura shrugged, knowing how Amanda hated raw eggs.

"You didn't use the egg substitute?"

"No. I didn't use it in the original batch, so I didn't use it in this."

"You could warn a person *in advance*."

"Consider it payback for warning me in advance about sending the ice cream to Ryan."

"We've got a bit of a crisis." Karen ran into the lab, slamming the door against the wall so hard she almost knocked the dry erase board onto the floor.

"Great. Just what I need. A crisis," Laura grumbled.

"I'll handle it," Amanda offered, standing.

"No. This one is Laura's."

"That's what I've got you guys for. To tell me I have to handle all crises." She sighed and shot a warning look at Amanda. "Don't run off with the mixture." "Wouldn't dream of it."

"What's the crisis?" Laura followed Karen down the hallway as they walked toward Laura's office.

"It's in here." Karen pushed open the door.

"The crisis is in my office. What happened?" She narrowed her eyes at her cousin.

"Something that only you can handle." Karen practically pushed her in and then closed the door on her before she could protest.

"That's why no one hires family," Laura shouted at the closed door. The lack of answer was exactly what she expected.

"I find working with family to be most useful."

Shit. She turned around to face the last person she wanted to see.

"What do you want?"

"An apology."

"Go to hell."

"Not from you. From me. I wanted to tell you in person."

"So tell me."

"Sorry." He shoved his hands into his pockets giving her a boyish grin that made her want to melt on the spot.

"Sorry I'm a little more than you can take?"

"Sorry I was such an ass. I was testing you."

"Funny, I thought you were trying to prove your manhood."

"My manhood was proven a long time ago," he stood, stretching out his long legs. Laura took in a sharp breath as he started toward her. She knew where this was heading. The same place it headed every time she and Ryan had been alone with one another.

"I'll bet." Unconsciously, she licked her lips. Boy, he looked good today. He was back in his usual cowboy wear from his jeans to his black hat. And looked good enough to eat. Or to lick chocolate ice cream from. She shivered at the thought.

"That offer isn't on the table any more."

She couldn't quite read those eyes. Was he teasing or serious? Something in her belly protested. "Oh," she tried not to sound disappointed.

"I have a new one." He stood right in front of her now, just an arm's length away.

She could pull him to her if so inclined, which she wasn't.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I know I wasn't exactly eloquent and all last night. But I have a new plan. Maybe one that you'll accept."

"Okay," she said warily. "You can try."

"Don't you think you should have a seat first?"

"Yeah. Uh, sure." She managed to walk past him, ignoring the masculine scent she knew she'd never be able to get out of the carpet.

"I want to know the truth about the ice cream. I don't believe that any ice cream can do what you say it can. I've looked over your numbers and everything and apparently somebody believes it."

"We do good business."

"Yeah. I can see that. But I wonder why. I don't think it's the reason they say."

"You wouldn't."

"Why? Because I'm a man?"

"No, because you're a cocky man."

"Point taken. Still, I have to know before I get involved."

"Okay. I'm ready for this new plan any time."

"I'm getting to it. I need some of your ice cream."

Laura's stomach sank. "Okay." She waited for the catch.

"I want to do a little bit of my own experiments. Test runs. And since no one will know what I'm doing, I figured it would be the best way to test it."

"Test it? You want to test it? And no one will know? What are you talking about?" She clenched and unclenched her fists beneath the table.

"I'm talking about testing it out on a, uh, friend."

"You want me to help out your sex life by helping you trick some unknowing lover?" A thousand emotions hit her at once. He was going to replace her with someone else. All in the name of science.

"That about sums it up," he smiled.

"No way."

"Then I guess I'll have to buy my own and test it out." He stood to leave. She was right on his heels.

"You hold it right there, buster. What are you going to do with it?"

"I think you know."

"No, I don't. But I won't have my product involved in any illicit testing." She practically shouted.

"It won't be illicit. She'll be perfectly willing. She just won't know I'm using super duper ice cream," he winked.

"I won't allow it."

"You can't stop it. If I buy the stuff, I can use it however I want to."

"I won't sell it to you."

"What are you afraid of?" his voice changed back to the one that made her stomach quiver. She wished she hadn't followed so closely. Didn't stand so near him. Didn't want him so much.

"I'm not afraid of anything," she folded her arms.

"Then you're jealous."

"Of you? Hardly," she laughed.

"Then prove it."

He was too cocky for his own good. He stood there, arms folded, legs spread, inviting her in. Have a taste, Laura. She groaned. She'd like to pound him on the chest for being such an ass. But then she'd have to touch his chest. And that brought to mind all kinds of interesting thoughts. She licked her lips again.

"Fine," she sighed. "You can have the ice cream. How much do you want and what flavors?"

He laughed. "I'll never figure you out."

"I said you can have the damned ice cream."

"I know. And it's killing you to give it to me."

"Is not." She went back to her desk and pressed the button on her pager. "I need Karen," she said to the voice on the other end.

"Yeah, what do you need?"

"Mr. LeJeune needs some ice cream samples. Can you send some in," she turned to Ryan. "What flavors do you want?"

"You pick out the ones you like best." Something about his tone brought back images of him covered in ice cream. Maybe she'd put together a chocolate syrup.

"Just send something," she grumbled into the pager.

"Sure thing, boss," she heard Karen say.

"It'll be right up," she gave Ryan a mockingly sweet smile.

"Thanks. I'm sure I'll have a hell of a night."

"I'm sure you will." She turned to her computer.

"I guess I'll just wait here for the delivery then."

"We have a waiting area outside," she offered without looking up.

"Yeah, I saw it on my way in. I'd rather sit here and watch you pretend you aren't curious about my date tonight."

"I'm not curious about your date tonight."

"Suit yourself."

Ryan never dreamed it would work. The idea came to him in the middle of the night while waking from another hot dream about Laura. Kicking himself for refusing her last night, he still wasn't sure what had come over him. Yeah, he was. He wanted her, but not like that.

Now, it would appear, he was going to have several pints of orgasm ice cream and no one to try it on. He could eat it himself, but that would ruin the fun. And he didn't plan on risking another two-day hard-on. One had been enough, thank you.

And he could have remedied the situation last night if he had only given in to what he wanted more than anything right now. It wasn't over yet. He still had time to seduce her on his terms rather than have her jump on the counter, spread her legs and yell *ride 'em cowboy!*

A smile spread across his face. He knew Laura wanted him for more than just one night. It was obvious from the way she squared her shoulders while she leaned into her computer screen to the way she was carefully avoiding looking up at him.

He looked around the office, hating the color scheme. It didn't suit an ice cream CEO. It should have plush carpeting in a dark, seductive color. And the drapes should

be sheer, gauzy. The screen saver he glimpsed earlier should be as mesmerizing as the woman sitting in front of it.

He thought about his own office, which had none of his personality, either. Of course, it had only been his office for a couple of days. Blake hadn't bothered adding any personal touches to it, so it pretty much looked like it had when it was his dad's. Right down to the old desk and worn out chair.

Laura reached up to rub her neck. His muscles tensed. He'd give anything to be invited over there to rub it for her. To feel that soft skin beneath his fingers. To taste her neck. His pants strained at the thought. She was still ignoring him, but he knew she was aware of his stare.

Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail like it had been last night. And her jeans clung to her body the same way they had then. Only her shirt was different. Instead of a white tank top, she wore a pink short-sleeved sweater. It outlined her breasts in a way that made him swear pink would forever be his favorite color.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. His ice cream was ready.

"Here you go." Karen handed him the box.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"Is that all?" Laura turned around, nodded her thanks to Karen. Karen quickly left, closing the door behind her.

"Yep. I think that'll do it." He drummed his fingers on the top of the box.

"Do you need me to dismiss you before you'll leave?"

"No. I think I can find my own way out."

He turned and strolled to the door, aware of her eyes on him all the way out. He took his time getting back to the Porsche. What the hell was he going to do with this ice cream?

Chapter Six

Wednesday nights in Oak Creek were usually quiet nights. The guys went to poker, the seniors went to bingo, and the Reynolds girls ate ice cream, a tradition ever since *I Scream* opened. Only tonight, the ringleader called in sick. Laura hadn't been in a mood to eat ice cream.

It wasn't because of Ryan LeJeune. No man could kill her urge to indulge in frozen love, as her cousin, Cate, called it. It just didn't have any appeal for her tonight. Nothing wrong with that. A girl can't live off ice cream alone.

She propped her slipper-covered feet up on her coffee table and clicked the channels on the remote. Surely something was on TV tonight. A re-run of that vampire show or something, anything, to take her mind off Ryan. She settled for a repeat of a mindless comedy that wouldn't take too much brainpower. The urge to just sit and veg out in front of the TV was too tempting.

The microwave announced that her popcorn was ready at the same time the phone began ringing. "This better be good," she called to the annoying intrusion, as if it could hear her.

"It's about time," Amanda complained as soon as Laura answered.

"I'm busy."

"Oh?"

"What do you want?" she gave up. There was no point in trying to run in circles

with her sister.

"It's Ryan."

Great. She let out a long sigh. "What about him?"

"He called here tonight looking for you. He said he needs you to get over to his place right away. Something to do with the ice cream."

"Why'd he call you?"

"I don't know. I guess he didn't have your number."

Not likely. Laura couldn't help but wonder if Amanda wasn't up to another one of her tricks. Lately she seemed to be pulling one scheme after another when it came to Ryan. "What's his problem? His date run out on him?"

"I don't know. He sounded kinda weird, though. And I figured since you live right down the road..."

"I'm not going over there."

"I think he's sick."

"Maybe he should go to the hospital then."

"Come on, Laura. If your ice cream made him sick, you need to know."

Amanda was right. Damn her. If the ice cream made Ryan ill, she did need to know so she could track down the problem. "Fine. I'll go. But he sure as hell better be dying." Laura grumbled, hanging up the phone.

The last thing she wanted tonight was to go over to Ryan LeJeune's house and work out some problem he had with her ice cream. Still, if the ice cream made Ryan sick, she needed to go over there and figure out why. She couldn't have a product on the market that caused illness. Even if the patient deserved to be ill.

She changed out of her nightgown and into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She ran a comb through her hair and begrudgingly threw on a little makeup. It wouldn't do to show up looking like she had been sitting home alone. That's when the idea struck her. She shouldn't go over there looking like she'd just slipped on some clothes. No, this called for extra attention.

It only took ten minutes to change into a denim halter dress and more carefully apply her makeup and arrange her hair. She slicked on some cherry red lipstick and checked her reflection in the mirror. Now, this looked like a girl who had been up to something. She smiled at the thought, not wanting Ryan to think she was just wasting her time alone. She slid on her black sandals with the two-inch heels and gave a turn in the mirror. This would make his mouth go dry.

* * * * *

At least the house was cool now. And he could take a warm shower if he wanted to. And the ice cream would stay frozen if he would put it in the freezer. Instead, Ryan found himself flipping off the lights and lighting the candles he had been using for the past couple of nights. He hit "play" on the CD player as he passed it and headed to the kitchen for a spoon.

Blake's music left much to be desired, he decided as he heard the twang of country music drift into the room. He smiled, imagining his brother racing in his Porsche listening to Garth Brooks. What a combination. He thought the car was more suited to

vintage Van Halen and KISS.

He wondered about Laura's plans for the night. More appropriately, what she thought he had planned. She tried to act like she didn't care, but he could tell by her standoffishness she was putting on an act.

She wanted to know how he planned to use her ice cream. Fire practically flew from her eyes when he mentioned using it. And he only hinted he would use it on someone else. If he could figure out how to get her here tonight, he would be able to really work on the jealousy. The scene was all but set with the candles and music.

Nothing was going according to plan. Especially where Laura was concerned. From the moment that he saw her, he had thought about kissing her. But Laura was nothing like the image she sent out. Sex may be part of her business, but it wasn't part of her life, a problem he could remedy if she'd just let him. They'd both have a hell of a time and make money to boot. But Laura wasn't like that. The truly beautiful ones never were.

Ryan sank down onto his sofa and tore into the first pint of ice cream. He cheated and bought several different brands today to see which ones tasted best. And to see if Laura's was all it was cracked up to be. He had *Godiva's Chocolate Raspberry Truffle*, *Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey*, and plain ol' *Blue Bell Dutch Chocolate*. He would do a taste test later on. Right now, he wanted to taste her ice cream.

He touched the first spoonful to his tongue, letting the sensual taste, linger on his palate. It was smooth, rich, creamy. All the things an ice cream should be. All the things a woman's skin should be.

He groaned. He wasn't having an orgasm, but he was getting a hard-on. And this time, it wasn't because of the ice cream. It was because of the woman. Surely he could think of a reason to call and invite her over. He could tell her he changed his mind about everything and was ready to sign on the dotted line.

He picked up the phone and dialed her number.

"Hi. It's Laura. I'm not in right now, but if you'll leave a message, I'll get back to you."

"Hi, Laura, it's, uh, Ryan. I was wondering. Well, I was calling to see if you could come over so we could talk about this business proposition. For real. No tricks. But I guess you're not home. Oh, well. I'll try later. Bye." He hung up the phone and rested his head against the back of the sofa. No relief tonight.

The headlights coming up the driveway caught his attention. He sat up, put the ice cream down. He wished his phone call could have conjured Laura.

He went to the door and pulled it open, stepping out onto the porch. A slow smile spread across his lips. Well, hell. She had come here prepared to deal, apparently. He let his eyes roam over her denim clad body. He liked jeans, but this denim dress was a nice change. It pushed her breasts up and teased along the edges. That hard-on he had only grew worse.

"Laura," he whispered her name as she approached. She had a strictly business look on her face.

"Are you okay?"

"I am now," he smiled.

"That's not what I mean. What happened with the ice cream?"

"Come on in and I'll tell you," he said, not really sure how to answer her.

"I guess it was a success."

"I don't know if I'd go that far." He watched her take in the scene. He didn't know what she was doing here, but his romantic set up was working like a charm on her. He hadn't seen her this angry since, well, since this morning.

"How far would you go, then?"

"How far *would* I go or how far *did* I go?" He dropped his voice to a low growl and watched her wrap her arms tightly around herself, squeezing her breasts forward.

"I'm not interested in your sex life. I'm interested in the ice cream. Is everything okay with it?"

"Not exactly what I had in mind, but okay." He sank back onto the sofa and watched her carefully sit on the edge of the chair.

"Then why am I here?"

Ryan opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. Why *was* she here? His mind reeled. He called two seconds ago. There was no way she could have gotten his message and rushed over. Something else had to be at work here. And he had to be careful not to spoil it. "I needed your opinion on something."

"You asked me here because you needed my opinion?" She stood now, hands on hips. "I was in the middle of something very important."

"Now wait." He needed to think of a way to calm her down. "I didn't mean..."

"Amanda called and said you were having problems with the ice cream. You were sick or something. And you needed me to come over here. Now what kind of scam are you running?"

"I'm not running a scam." He tried to think. He could really use this if his brain would function.

"I'm leaving." She spun on her heel, but he caught her arm, causing her to stop.

"Wait."

"Let go." She pulled free.

"Wait. Please. Don't go. I do have a problem," he managed. *Think, think, think.*

"I'm waiting." She arched her eyebrow, making him feel as if he were being scolded by the teacher. That thought caused another reaction in his pants. If he didn't get a grip on the situation, he was going to lose control completely.

"Sit down. Please."

She obliged. "Spill it."

If she kept looking at him like that, he just might. "I tried the ice cream. And nothing happened." He watched her eyes darken.

"What do you mean, nothing happened?"

"I mean nothing happened. No reaction." He wasn't exactly lying. Just not being completely honest.

"I see. What did you use?"

"All the stuff you sent earlier."

"And nothing happened?"

"Nope." A satisfied grin crossed his face. Yep, she was worried. An unsatisfied customer.

"Maybe it wasn't the ice cream."

"Well, it wasn't the company," he straightened.

"Well, it wasn't the ice cream."

"I don't know. I think maybe it was. Maybe this batch wasn't any good. You didn't do something different did you?" That was it. He had her. Her whole demeanor changed

when he mentioned a possible mistake. Her work was her pride.

"No, I didn't. The formulas are very precise."

"My sugar wasn't in these, was it?" He tried to sound worried, but was in truth getting all worked up watching her concern as she chewed on her bottom lip.

"No, it wasn't. I don't know what happened. Have you got any left?"

"Yeah, I do. Are you gonna take it back to the lab and test it?"

"Huh?"

"The lab. I figured you'd want to test it tonight."

"I can do that here," she argued, taking him completely off guard.

"Here?" He tried to suppress his smile.

"Yes. Unless you are otherwise occupied."

"Nope. Not occupied."

"Good."

"I'll just go get it, then."

Ryan left her in the living room. Great. She was going to try out the ice cream here. Well, he got his wish, but he felt like hell about it. He shouldn't have to trick her into this. And if she did get all turned on, what would he do? He knew what he wanted to do, but doing it was another story.

He eyed the containers he had placed in his freezer. An idea came to him, but he wasn't sure it would work. She was the ice cream goddess after all and would be able to distinguish her own product. Wouldn't she?

He peeled open her containers and then the others. They looked about the same. He gave them a quick taste. He couldn't tell much difference. But they were her creation. She would know.

His hands shook as he pulled three glass dishes from his cabinet. Maybe he could pull it off. He caught sight of his tie flung across the back of one of the kitchen chairs. A more interesting idea occurred to him.

He smiled, carrying the tie around his neck and balancing the glasses in his hands.

Chapter Seven

"What are you doing with *that*?" Laura folded her arms across her chest and eyed the tie draped around his neck. That dangerous look in his eyes was enough to send a shiver down her spine, but she tried to suppress it. She had been on edge ever since she got here. And the husky tone of his voice didn't help any.

"A taste test."

"I've tasted my ice cream before. I don't need a test. I just need to see if there's anything wrong with it." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I know. But you know what they say? When you block out some of your senses the others are heightened." He held up the tie as if he planned to use it as a blindfold.

"You are not putting that thing on me." She pointed at the tie and tried not to react to his smile.

"Come here," his voice was a low drawl. She didn't want to obey, but her body refused to listen to her mind. She stood and moved to the sofa, giving him a wary stare with every motion.

"I won't tie it too tight, I promise," he whispered into her ear. He held the tie in front of her eyes, proving what she knew to be true. He was going to blindfold her.

"This is a bad idea," she protested. Her stomach did tiny flip-flops at both the suggestion of being blindfolded and the person doing it.

"I won't hurt you. It's just ice cream."

Laura took in a deep breath as he placed the blindfold securely against her eyes and then tied it behind her head.

"Is it too tight?"

"No," her voice caught in her throat.

"Can you see?"

"No."

"Good."

He sank down beside her, his weight causing her to almost fall into him. She licked her lips, anticipating the first taste, feeling herself grow wet from the nearness.

"Try this one."

When the spoon touched her lips, they automatically opened, allowing her to lick the flavor from the cold metal. "What flavor is this?"

"I don't know. One of yours."

"It's not one of mine," she protested. She raised her arms to take off the blindfold, but his hands steadied her, keeping her from reaching it.

"Don't," he warned softly, sending a shiver up her back.

"What flavor?"

"I don't know. I took them out of the containers. I think it's cherry something."

"It doesn't taste right."

"I told you there was something wrong with it."

His voice was so soft, so seductive, she swore she would melt if he touched her. He was already driving her insane by sitting close enough she could feel him move, but not close enough to touch her. "Try another one," she managed through her dry throat.

"Okay."

The second flavor was no better than the first. They tasted wrong. The basic flavor was right, but something was off. She tried to steady her breathing. Maybe it wasn't the ice cream. Maybe it was the company.

She recognized one of Keith Urban's love songs playing in the background. She smelled the flames from the candles, could practically hear the wax melting and dripping against the glass plate. And then there was Ryan.

Men weren't supposed to smell this good. Especially not roguish men like him. He'd slept with half of Oak Creek. And here he was playing seducer with her. And she was eating it up just like all the women before her. And heaven help her, it was all she could do not to reach out and grab him as he brought the spoon to her lips for another taste.

She froze.

"What was that?"

"I dropped a little. Let me get it."

Her breath caught in her throat. She stiffened as the liquid made its way slowly down the exposed flesh. It was replaced by his warm lips as they made contact, lapping up the ice cream. His hair brushed against her, teasing her, making her wonder how it would feel to have his hair spill across her face while they made love. She let out a tiny moan as he licked the rest of the ice cream from her chest.

"Ryan." She wasn't sure if his name sounded like a protest or a plea. In reality, it was a little of both.

"Oops. I think I dropped some more." The spoon ran along the exposed skin of her thigh, making her quiver. "Let me get that."

This time, his tongue darted out first, lapping up the cream and then tracing a trail up to the edge of her dress. She threw her head back, trying to decide if she wanted to rip off the blindfold and walk out or stay and see what would come next.

The truth was, she couldn't move if she wanted to. She may have only been blindfolded, but he may as well have her tied down. Every muscle in her body protested when her brain suggested they try to move.

"You want me to stop?" His voice was husky, his breath close to her face. She shook her head wildly, but was unable to speak. He let out a little laugh and then dripped ice cream along her chest again.

"You know, I like this dress," he licked along the trail he had made. "I like the way it laces up. I can untie it." The ties loosened as he spoke. "And explore a little at a time."

The spoon rubbed against her thigh again before being replaced with his lips. The ice cream may not have tasted right, but it apparently still had the punch. She wasn't able to resist Ryan LeJeune.

She rested against the sofa when he braced her back with his hand, lowering her. When his hand skimmed down her side, she jumped in reaction.

"I think all this ice cream needs is a little encouragement. Wouldn't you agree?" She nodded. "Someone to gently talk to it. Someone to seduce it."

Yes! She wanted to scream. Seduction. The whole scene was set for seduction. And she was falling into it as easily as she had come over here tonight. If she were to be honest with herself, she knew she had just been looking for an excuse to come over. And seduce Ryan.

"Ryan," she moaned, arching her back against him.

"Hmmm?" He moved on top of her and dropped the spoon. She heard it hit against the hardwood floor a second before he captured her lips.

Her head started spinning. What had Amanda said about using the ice cream as an enhancer? God, she had been right. His powerful mouth tasted like ice cream, and the insides were cool. She knew instinctively how he would feel if he lowered himself for another kind of kiss. His tongue would be cold, exploring, teasing. Just like it was now.

She tore the blindfold from her eyes as his head moved lower. His body pressed against her, searing her with its heat. His erection pressed into her belly, almost enough to send her over the edge. The great Ryan LeJeune was hard for her. And this time, he hadn't had any of the fudge ripple ice cream.

She reached down and pulled him back up to face her, using his long curls as leverage. When she looked into his heated eyes, she saw raw hunger. She licked her lips. It's now or never. As smoothly as she could manage, she pulled him against her and pressed her body tightly to his, wriggling her hips in invitation and glorying in his response.

"Not here," Ryan groaned and swept her into his arms, holding her gaze as he carried her up the stairs and into his bedroom. When he kicked the door open, her senses were assaulted with his scent.

Ryan gently laid her on the bed and then stripped off his shirt. Thank God for

moonlight. He was incredible. She had never seen a chest so perfectly built before. A teasing amount of cinnamon hair splayed across the rippled muscles of his chest. She could cover him with whipped cream and he'd look just like a sundae. A chocolate, caramel and cinnamon sundae. A new flavor came to mind in the seconds before he lowered himself to her.

Ryan covered her mouth with his, quieting all thoughts of ice cream. "Are you ready for me, Laura?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I don't believe you." He slid his hand down, raising her dress up around her hips. "Let me see." He burned a teasing trail along the edges of her panties.

Thank God she had worn something sexy tonight. She took in a sharp breath as his skilled fingers moved the flimsy lace to the side. At first he teased, just running his fingers along the edges of the lace, skimming the exposed flesh. She bit her lip until she tasted blood.

"Are you ready?"

She moaned, nodded her head wildly, as he dipped a finger inside.

"God, Laura," he groaned, delving further in. She arched her back to meet him as he continued his exploration, pressing against her tender outer flesh with the heel of his hand.

He pushed her dress up to her waist and ran his free hand along the waistband of her white lace panties before he slid them down her legs. "More," she managed.

She watched in awe as he removed his hand and plunged the wet finger into his mouth. "You're good enough to eat." His hoarse tone sent a shiver through her body. It started at the base of her neck and went down, down, down until her entire body quaked.

He dipped his head between her thighs and he dove in, tongue first. God, it was just as she imagined it would be. His mouth was cool from the ice cream, his tongue hard. He teased her clit before licking at her inner walls. Her body shook, and she clung to his hair.

"Where did that tie go?" he mused. His breath teased against her swollen flesh, but the comment didn't register until he moved away from her.

"Where are you going?" she half sat up.

"Shh. I'm not going far."

Laura watched as he gracefully bent over and picked up the silk tie. He wove it between his fingers and then draped it around his neck. "What are you doing?" Her breath came in short spurts, wild ideas rushing through her head, exciting her.

"Undress for me," he coaxed.

She obeyed as he sat back down on the bed and watched her loosen the laces of her dress. Her fingers were having difficulty cooperating. She finally had the dress loose enough to slip it over her head, leaving her sitting in front of him in only her bra and panties.

"You are beautiful."

Her heart beat wildly at his confession. She hadn't felt beautiful before this very moment. Ever. "What do you want?"

"I want you to take off your bra. And these," he slid his finger under her panties. They had been cutting into her soft flesh causing a sensation she couldn't describe. When he slid his finger underneath them, they tightened, causing the elastic to rub

against her clit. She moaned and threw her head back before sliding them off and tossing them into the heap of clothes on the floor. She lay back on the bed, spread her legs wide for him and arched her back in invitation.

"Not yet," he teased. He moved over her, guiding her hands up above her head. "Have you ever let someone else have control of you?"

Her eyes widened at the thought. "No," she whispered.

"Why not? What are you afraid of? You know, it would be better to give control to a man instead of a dessert." The thought was ludicrous, but the sensual tone of his voice made it sound like the most inviting proposition she had ever heard.

She gasped when he took her hands into his and then wrapped them up in the headboard. His old four-poster bed was one that had been made for this kind of activity. The latticework of iron invited a little light bondage.

When he wrapped the tie around her wrists, she lost control, growing wetter from the feel of the silk against her skin. She would have passed out from the sensation, but she was too intent on finding out what he was going to do next.

"Give me control," he murmured, placing a light kiss on each wrist.

She was already too far gone to answer. Arching against him, she delighted in the way the coarse material of his jeans rubbed against her sensitive flesh. She continued to move against him, moaning, almost bringing herself to climax by that simple motion.

He remained still over her, letting her move, letting her please herself with the rough feel of his jeans. When she began to quake, he thrust himself up against her, continuing the motion, continuing the assault. She shivered with delight, her arms pulling on the tie, attempting to free herself.

She wanted him to undress. She wanted him to take her. Now. She wanted to see all of him. Naked. Above her. Inside her. *Now, Now, Now!* "Ryan, please."

"Please what?"

"Please let me go. Let me see you." She labored against her restraints. His gentle laugh only heated her movements. "You like this, don't you?"

"Yes. I do," he growled.

God, she wanted her hands in his hair. She wanted to run her fingers along his taut flesh. Wanted to explore the cinnamon hair that covered his chest. She shivered again, knowing how he would feel. He would be firm, hard. With skin like silk. "Ryan."

In one motion, he freed her wrists. Her hands instantly went into his hair, but he pulled away long enough to remove his pants.

"It won't last long," he warned.

"I don't care."

"Are you ready?"

Her nod was interrupted when he pressed against her heated flesh. He lay just

outside of her wetness, begging for entry, pushing into her folds. She tried to relax, tried to let him in. Her nails dug into his back and she pressed him lower, letting his length finally slip into her. She widened, grinding her hips against him as he filled her completely. She exploded into a thousand pieces.

She arched against him, rubbing her lips against the base of his cock. His balls rested on the curve of her ass and his hair, free from its binding, fell into her face. Her flesh tightened and expanded, throbbing with him. "Oh, God," she called out. He hadn't even

started moving yet, and she was already coming.

"Hold on, baby," he cooed against her ear before throwing his head back and letting out a howl. "You feel incredible," he smiled down at her. "Your pussy is so tight, so wet," he murmured.

She reached up and splayed her hands across his chest, and then ran them up and down his torso. She delighted at the shivers she caused. Her breath caught in her throat when he stopped her hands from their exploration.

He firmly gripped her wrists and held them against the soft cotton sheets, taking full control of her. She easily gave it to him, feeling completely uninhibited with him. His face twisted as his orgasm built, making him look even more beautiful. His release came quickly, as he had warned. Rather than being disappointed, Laura was spellbound. He was incredible.

Ryan collapsed on top of her, his weight only increasing the sensations as her orgasm ripped through her. She clung to him, her hands twisted in his hair, his scent all around her making her feel something she couldn't define. It had been a long damned time. And this felt so good.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I was afraid it wouldn't last long."

"It was fine, I assure you," she smiled lazily.

"A hell of a lot better than fine," he smiled back. He reached out and pushed her

hair out of her eyes. When he brought his head down for a kiss, she met his lips. He gave. She took. They both felt changed.

Laura wanted to tease him about the ice cream. Tell him she knew there was nothing wrong with it. But her stomach protested. She felt ill. Maybe there was something wrong with it, after all. No, that wasn't it. She was disappointed with herself. She had given in and become a name on the list for Ryan LeJeune.

She moved his arm from around her and left the bed, careful not to wake him. He had fallen asleep with little effort, curled up against her. His hair fell across her shoulder, mixing in with her own, bringing to mind all kinds of forbidden thoughts.

She padded quietly to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. She examined herself in the mirror. Nothing on the outside had changed. But everything inside had. She had given in to her lust. And that was something she rarely ever did.

She was a modern woman, she argued. Thirty-one next month. She owned her own business. Had a nice house. Had everything she needed. Who would blame her for a one-night fling with Ryan LeJeune? No one.

No one but herself. She deserved this. She had worked hard. And he was her reward? No, that wasn't right. She splashed water onto her face. She didn't know what Ryan was. Except for a fabulous lover. Was there ever any doubt about that, though? A man with lips like that had to be incredible.

She opened the bathroom door. The light streamed into the bedroom, illuminating him as he slept. She couldn't do this again. That sinking feeling in her chest told her if she did, she'd be in danger of losing her heart to him. And she couldn't allow that. Men like Ryan ate hearts like hers for breakfast.

She may have given over control to him tonight, but it wouldn't happen again. No matter how wonderful it had felt. She gathered her clothes, careful not to wake him. And left without looking back.

Ryan knew something was wrong when he woke up. The bed felt too cold. He scrambled in the darkness for something he knew was missing. The other side of the bed was cold. He glanced at the clock by the bed. It was three A.M. Laura hadn't slept here.

He sat up, his head still reeling from what had happened. His pride was eating at him, along with his conscience. He never intended to use the ice cream as an excuse to seduce her. He only meant to tease at it. She had been so willing, though.

He groaned as he remembered her reaction to his body. She had wanted him just as much as he wanted her. He'd be willing to bet his business on it. Her lips had been soft against him, her body firm. Wet. Waiting.

He growled into his pillow. Man, she had done a number on him. She hadn't even given him a chance at round two, which he swore would last longer than round one.

And worst of all, she probably thought her reaction to him was because of the ice cream. He hadn't realized tricking her the way he had would backfire on him. He knew he was feeding her *Ben & Jerry's*, but she thought it was her ice cream. She probably thought the whole night was induced by *I Scream Ice Cream*.

His whole body ached as he made his way to the bathroom. He let out a low growl when he saw her note written across the mirror. "I told you there was nothing wrong with the ice cream." Round two was definitely in order.

Chapter Eight

Laura knew when she was being played. And she was definitely being played. Her sister had called last night telling her Ryan needed her. Not two minutes after she left her house, Ryan called wanting to talk business. Something wasn't right. She had every intention of marching into Ryan's office today to ask him exactly what kind of game he was playing.

The drive over to LeJeune's wasn't very long. The factory was just on the edge of town but was still pretty close to the houses. She fought the urge to ram her car into the back of the Porsche as she drove up. Hitting the car wouldn't do any good. And to be honest, she was angrier with herself than with Ryan. After all, she had played right into his hands last night. And loved every minute of it.

She parked her car and headed up the creaky steps to the main office. The parking lot was practically deserted, confirming her suspicions that Ryan had suspended the business until he had news about the sugar substitute.

His office was easy enough to find at the end of the small corridor right by the front door. She heard him talking on the phone as she approached.

"What I'm saying is you need you get your ass back into town." She heard his heated pitch.

"You don't understand, we're about to go under. I'm busting my nuts trying to put this deal through with the ice cream company."

There was a long pause.

"No. I think it's all a bunch of bullshit, but I've gotta do whatever since you put my ass on the line." Another bout of silence. "We're about to lose everything here, Blake. No, nobody knows."

She heard him throwing a ball against the office wall. His chair creaked beneath his weight. She tried to make sense of the conversation, but she was focused on one detail. He was scamming her. Doing whatever it takes to seal the deal. And he thought he could just charm her with a little sex, and she'd lay her business deal at his feet.

"I can handle it," he finally said. "But you better get your ass back in town so we can take care of the other details. I can only do so much by myself."

His tone relaxed now. "Fine. Yeah. I'll tell Laura you said hi."

At the mention of her name, she turned on her heels. She wouldn't let him continue this game he was playing. She wanted no part of it. She didn't expect him to step out of his office while she was making her getaway.

"Laura," he called from behind her.

She kept walking, determined to keep her head up. Determined to walk away from Ryan LeJeune and never look back.

"Laura, wait."

"What do you want?" She didn't dare turn around.

"I want to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to you."

She pulled away when his hand closed over her arm.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm here to tell you we don't have a deal."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean our deal is off." Laura rubbed her arm when he released her. She hoped she sounded serious, hoped her eyes weren't betraying her, in spite of the tears that were building.

He folded his arms across his chest and stood there, probably trying to think of something to say. "Just like that," he started. "You got what you want and now you decide to end the deal."

"I got what *I* wanted?" She couldn't believe him.

"Yeah, you. A night with one of the legendary LeJeunes."

"You really are full of yourself. You think all this was to get you into bed?"

"Wasn't it?"

"You're the one who proposed sex for sugar in the first place."

"And you're the one who couldn't resist."

"You're out of your mind."

"Yeah, I am. I'm pretty desperate, too. And that makes me a little bit dangerous."

"Well, I think you're a little bit full of shit. I want to know what the hell is going on here."

"I don't know what's going on here." It was probably the first honest thing he'd ever said to her, but it didn't answer all her questions. She still wanted to know who he was talking to and what exactly he was planning to do to save his company.

"Who was on the phone?" She narrowed her eyes at him, her tone serious. She needed to get to the bottom of this deception. Maybe then she could figure out why being near him did nothing but stir up a serious desire to throw him against the wall and run her tongue all over his body. Even if she was mad at him.

"Blake." He let out a long sigh, his frustration obvious to her.

"So I take it you found him."

"Yeah. I found him. He wasn't really lost, just hiding."

"Then I think you should explain what the hell it is you two are planning."

"There's no plan, Laura. That's just it. Maybe I had one, and then I met you. And well, shit, everything is so mixed up now. I'm on the verge of losing my company. We got an offer this morning. I'm going to have to sell."

His words hit her hard. That sinking feeling in her chest only spread through to her arms and made her feel weak all over. He couldn't sell. Not when he'd worked so hard. She had her doubts about the sugar, though. Ryan had put the whole thing together by accident. He didn't really know a lot about the chemistry involved. He was more of a by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of guy. And she was afraid the chemical would break down. More than afraid. She had a nagging feeling.

"I'll buy you out," she said before she could stop herself.

"Thanks, but I'll fight my own battles."

"This is about your ego again, isn't it?"

"What ego?"

"You know what ego. The one that won't allow you to let me help. Come on, Ryan, you're willing to sell me your sugar. Sell me the company."

"And what? Work for you?" The tone of his voice cut through her, making her wish she'd never suggested such a ludicrous idea.

"It's a thought." Though one she hadn't had until about ten seconds ago. He was right. It would never work. "Forget I said anything."

"Done. I'll figure a way out of this."

"Without my help, huh? I thought you and I... never mind. Good luck with whatever it is you plan to do."

She turned to walk away, this time determined to make it out of the building without making a complete fool of herself. She was falling for the guy. And that was the last thing she needed. Especially if he couldn't accept her help. What was it with men anyway? She made it two steps before he caught up with her.

He spun her around, his hand gripping her arm again, but this time there was a spark of something in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "Don't go."

"Please, don't start with me."

"I have to. I don't understand any of this, but I know I want you near me." He looked dangerous again as he lowered his head to hers. But the danger was completely of the carnal variety, making her head spin a little before his lips made contact with hers.

He completely caught her off guard with the soft invitation of his lips. It belied everything he said to her. It made her wonder if he felt something for her, too. The softness only lasted for a second, as if he'd had time to reconsider. Then, he took her hair into his hands and pulled her backward into his office, his lips still claiming hers, this time with brutal force.

Her impending tears and self-doubt were gone now, replaced with liquid fuel. She was on the edge again. All it would take to send her over would be one more move, one more advance.

He spun her around as he kicked the door closed. She gasped at the roughness he used to push her back against the desk. This wasn't a soft experience. There was nothing

playful in the way he moved toward her again. This time, he took her throat into his hand and pulled her head toward him again, nipping at her lips before taking them again.

"I want you on my desk."

He lifted her onto the side of the desk before she could protest or pull down her dress, which had ridden up. Before she could do anything but oblige him whatever he wanted.

"Now, lie back, Laura. I'm going to show you exactly why you need me."

She wanted to protest. Wanted to tell him to go to hell. But no one had ever commanded her in this way before. For some reason, it seemed to be exactly what she needed. She needed someone to take control. He had started the game last night with the bondage. Today, it was different.

She gave in to the wolf-like tone of his voice and reclined back on the top of his desk. She kept her head raised, holding his eyes with hers. "What do you want from me, Ryan?"

"I want to fuck the hell out of you. But first, I'm gonna make you come all over my desk. And then I'm gonna lick it from your thighs. And then, I'm gonna make you scream out my name."

Her breath caught in her throat at his admission. This Ryan was different from the one she loved last night. This one was everything he'd said. He was desperate and dangerous. And he was making her wetter than she'd ever been.

He pulled her to the edge of the desk and slid her panties down her thighs. His hands were cold against her flesh, as if he'd been eating ice cream again. She caught a glimpse of the trashcan. Her fudge ripple container lay in there along with a heap of papers.

That was the last thought she had before his tongue started making its way up her thigh.

"I thought about you today," he crooned against her skin. "I thought about fucking you again. About having you come here and taking you just like this."

She shivered at his words. No one had ever spoken so boldly to her before.

"But I want to do something to you first."

He brought his mouth down to her pussy and licked, then sucked. Then bit. She shivered and clung to the sides of the desk. The hard edge cut into her skin, and the sensation only heightened what he was doing to her.

"You know what I want to do?"

She nodded.

"Tell me." He continued to lick, making it hard for her to think. "I'll stop if you

don't tell me," he warned. "You want to fuck me." "More than that." He roughly shoved a finger into her, slid it back out and replaced

it with two. "You want to..." she couldn't think. What had he said? "Tell me, Laura, tell me what I want to do to you." "I don't know," she confessed, feeling the tears building up in her eyes again. "Yes, you do. I want to make you come so hard you'll never forget it. Are you

gonna come for me?" "Yes!" she screamed as the waves approached. She clung to the desk,

shaking her head back and forth, feeling the
tears slip down her cheeks. She had never felt
anything

like the orgasm that ripped through her body. Never. "That's it," he coaxed. "Be a good
girl." She whimpered and finally collapsed on the desk. She moaned when he
pulled his

fingers out. "Taste yourself, Laura," he rubbed his fingers along her bottom lip. "You
taste

better than ice cream." "I want you," she moaned. "Not yet. I'm not through with you."

He moved away from her. She raised up and let her eyes follow him to the
refrigerator. "What are you doing?" "Giving you a little taste of your own medicine," he
grinned. She gasped when he pulled the fudge pops from the freezer. "What are you
doing

with *that*?" "I want you to show me what you
like. What you want me to do," he
shrugged, as if he had just said something
perfectly natural. "What do you mean?"
She sat up completely now, still a little
unsure of his

meaning. "I want you to take this," he placed the fudge pop in her hand, "and make it
melt." He was insane, having her on the edge, knowing all she wanted was to have
him

inside of her. She eyed the chocolate stick. It wasn't one of hers. "Well?" "Well what?"
she shot back, still not sure if she wanted to go along with this. "Either you do it
yourself or I leave you here, just like this. Without the one thing

you and I both know you want." "

I don't want you," she lied.

"Yes, you do." He reached down and ran his finger along her pussy. "If you didn't,
you wouldn't be so wet. Now, are you gonna make it melt?"

He stood back, arms folded, challenging her. She hadn't come here for this, but
damn it, she couldn't stop herself. She couldn't think she wanted him so badly. And
right now, she didn't really care if he was using her or if she was using him. None of it
mattered.

"You're starting to drip," he nodded toward the fudge pop.

She held his eyes as she took the fudge pop into her mouth, catching the excess. He
groaned and shifted, the outline of his cock evident against his jeans. He was hard. For
her. And she had all the power.

Laura pulled her dress over her head, holding the fudge pop in her mouth as she
worked. He wanted a show. She could give him a show. She removed the fudge pop and
ran it down the front of her chest, just along the edges of her bra. He groaned again, not
taking his eyes from her.

She used one hand to undo the front clasp on her bra and let her breasts spring
forward. Having him watch her was becoming more and more liberating. She'd never
felt this kind of freedom before. She ran the fudge pop down to one nipple and then to
the other, delighting in the chill on her breasts and the way her nipples immediately
hardened in reaction.

Ryan's eyes clouded over as he stood over her, just inches away. She could practically feel the heat radiating from his body. Still, he didn't touch her. He just stood there, his hands on either side of her. Waiting.

Laura moved back on the desk, thankful for the desk's large size. She spread her legs and placed her feet on the desk, raising herself up to his level. He leaned down so his breath covered her, teasing her, daring her.

She slowly brushed the fudge pop down her body, running it along her clit. It instantly hardened. Chills broke out at the intense sensation. Without taking a second to rethink it, she slid the fudge pop into her pussy and let out a scream. God, this thing was cold!

"You like that?"

"Do you?" she managed to find her voice.

"Yeah. You look incredible. Beautiful." He ran a hand down her thigh.

Beautiful. She felt it, too.

"You're melting," he smiled.

"Mmmmm..." was her only answer. Slowly, she began pulling the popsicle out of her pussy. When it was almost out, she shoved it back in, gasping again, feeling the chocolate drip out of her and onto the desk. She did it again and again, each time with increased intensity.

"Make yourself come, Laura," he coaxed.

She did. She moved her hand in and out, back and forth, swirling in circles. Her free hand reached down to tease her clit. When she found the right intensity, she lay there, fucking herself with the fudge pop, his breath covering her, both hands moving freely. When she came, the intensity ravaged her body, making every nerve ending stand on edge. Everything about giving up control to Ryan made her feel more alive than she ever had before. Her heart raced and her breath came in short spurts while her head reeled from the intensity of what had just happened to her. She didn't have time to recover from the sensations before he pulled the stick out of her pussy and rammed his cock deep into her.

"God, Laura," was all he said as he moved. He held onto her knees, pounding frantically, ignoring her nails digging into the flesh of his arm. His dick ached. He had never felt anything like this.

Physically, this was the best sex he'd ever had. Never had he been with a woman so eager to please or one that his body so quickly responded to. She made him hard just by being around him. Something about the way her eyes always seemed to look deep into him both teased him and made him want to please her. That's what made her different. With Laura, he wanted to make her come, wanted to make her scream out his name.

Emotionally, she scared the hell out of him, which was something he didn't want to think about. He had never shared such an intimate moment with another woman before. Sure, he'd had his share of women. Kinky women. But none this vulnerable.

His balls slapped against her ass, and he became caught up in the frenzied rhythm. The tops of his thighs made hard contact with the edge of the desk as her body moved backward from the frantic motions. He pulled her into him again, watching her breasts jiggle with his every stroke.

Her hands gripped the edges of the desk as she lay open for him, letting him take

her, allowing him to drive into her over and over again. He watched her face twist into a look that resembled agony but one that he knew to be sheer pleasure. It was amazing to bring a woman like her to the edge. Every intense stroke gained a new contortion of her features. Her lips spread into a smile, then pressed together into a tight line. Her eyes opened, wild and wide and then squeezed shut again, as if looking up at him were too much for her. The force of his movements pushed her breath out of her body in a way so that her panting sounds and moans only added to his already intense need.

When she came, she opened her eyes, holding him with her intense stare. He remembered hearing once that looking deep into someone's eyes and holding the gaze could be one of the most intense emotional encounters ever. Right now, it damn near rocked his world. What sent him over the edge was not only the way she looked at him but the way she clung to him, pressing her breasts against him, pulling him down on top of her, crushing herself beneath his body.

Her walls tightened around him like a fist, milking him, forcing him to the edge, coaxing him to come inside and coat her walls with his juice. His balls reacted, tensing a second before his hot liquid shot from his body and into her. Her insides, once cold from the ice cream, were now hot, searing him, controlling his desperate need to crawl inside of her and never return. He collapsed on top of her, his breathing erratic. He didn't want to move. He wasn't sure how to move off of someone who had just changed his life.

Chapter Nine

The last thing Laura wanted to do was go on a date with Ryan. She barely managed to escape their last few encounters intact. A night alone with him was sure to do her in. Especially since she shared something so intimate with him. She wasn't sure how to face him after their last ice cream encounter. And she still didn't know what had made her say yes to the date. It was obviously a temporary bout of insanity.

She pushed aside dress after dress. Each one was a little too this or not enough of that. She finally settled on a yellow cotton sundress and a light denim jacket to ward off the night air, which was unusually chilly. Ryan told her to dress casually when he called earlier today.

She stepped into her sandals and did a twirl in front of the mirror. God, she would have given anything to date Ryan LeJeune in high school. It had been her secret fantasy. But girls like her didn't date guys like him. If they did, they only got their hearts broken. He had been a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy even then.

At sixteen, Ryan towered above the rest of the guys. That wild look in his eyes became his trademark, and every girl in Oak Creek practically threw herself at him. It didn't hurt that he had his own car—a 1968 Camaro in electric blue. It also didn't hurt that he was captain of the football and track teams.

Laura had been a bookworm even then. She had dated, but never anyone as good looking or with the kind of reputation as Ryan. No, she dated nice guys from church camp or from the local university. No one who would be considered bad or dangerous by anyone's standards. No one in the same league with the man she was going out with tonight.

It was all she could do not to chew her fingernails to nubs as she waited on the front porch. She was anxious, but she didn't want to admit it. The plan was to wait out here until she could see his headlights coming down the street. Then she would hightail it

into the house and keep him waiting. She hoped.

She sat on the porch, rocking back and forth in the old swing, letting the night air carry her hair wherever it wanted. She liked nights like this. They usually didn't come until October. Thanks to a spree of evening thunderstorms the last few days, the nights were cool and breezy. And slightly damp.

She pulled her jacket around her and watched as the lightning lit up the sky in the distance. The moon shone overhead, but the sky was cloudy further out, threatening another storm. She shivered a little. There was something about storms that both frightened her and made her want to find someone to cuddle up to.

She eyed the distant lightning again. There was a good chance the storm wouldn't hit Oak Creek tonight. They often blew around the area. She listened for the frogs to see if they were singing tonight. That usually meant rain. All she could hear was the other sounds of the night. No frogs.

She didn't hear the footfalls coming from the side of the house, either.

"Waiting for someone?"

Her heart leapt into her throat. Where had he come from? "No one in particular," she shot back without turning around.

"It's a good thing I came by then. Or you'd be out here by yourself." She heard Ryan step onto the landing and then jump over the porch railing. "These are for you," he held out a small bouquet of flowers from his garden.

Laura eyed the mixture of roses, daisies and mums. It wasn't exactly the most attractive blend she'd ever seen, but the look on his face made her flush. "Thanks," she took them, avoiding his fingers.

"So, were you waiting for someone?" The swing creaked when he sat down next to her.

"I have a date tonight." She held the flowers to her nose. The roses were sweet, but the mums smelled awful. She wrinkled her nose.

"Lucky guy," Ryan nudged her with his shoulder. "So, are you ready?"

"Do I look ready?"

"You don't want me to answer that, do you? I'd tell you what you look ready for."

"Then don't answer it," she stood and walked to the front door. "I'm going to put these in water," she announced.

"Suit yourself."

She walked into the house, aware of his eyes on her as she closed the door. Finding a vase right now was going to be all but impossible. She was too much on edge, so she settled for a drinking glass, filled it with water, and placed the flowers in there. Taking one last, deep breath, she stepped back into the hallway, grabbed her purse and then met him out on the porch. "Okay. I'm ready now. Where's your car?" she asked, looking around.

"Down the street. I thought this would be more like high school. You know, I could sneak up to your window and coax you out into the darkness to do all kinds of obscene things," he winked.

"Don't bet on it."

"Don't tell me you never snuck out?"

"No, I didn't." They walked down the porch steps together, him slowing his pace for her.

"I don't doubt that. From what I hear, you didn't do much wrong back then."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Nope. Just telling it like I heard it."

He slipped his hand into hers as they walked and tried to find a way to tell her she had changed him. In the past week, he had managed to renegotiate parts of his deal with her. The ice cream using his sugar byproduct still wasn't ready yet. Tomorrow would be the do or die day. That was the reason why he wanted to get things out on the table tonight. He wanted her to know that what was going on had nothing to do with their business arrangement.

"It looks like rain," he said, mentally kicking himself for the generic reference.

"Yeah. You know Isis is brewing out there in the Gulf."

"Yeah." He opened the car door for her. "So, where do you want to go tonight?"

"You're the one in charge," she smiled. "I assumed you had a plan."

"You wanna just call it a night and go back to my place?" he shot her a grin and then winked at her.

"No. I want romance," she mocked.

"Oh, I see. A regular ol' roll in the hay ain't enough?"

"I have never had a roll in the hay," she teased.

"Lucky for you, I have a barn behind my house."

"Not a chance. I haven't had dinner yet."

"Fine. Romance," he shrugged and then turned the key in the ignition. The Porsche purred as it usually did, reminding him of his own engine. Just looking at her in a dress like that made him want nothing more than to take it off of her.

Laura had a plan for tonight. After what he put her through the other day, she knew the only way to get even with him was to, well, get even with him. She'd had sex before, but she had never experienced loss of control and then rebirth of control in a matter of five minutes. Ryan had given her that. He had managed to do something ice cream couldn't do. And that disturbed her on so many levels.

She could be gutsy and bold. She could make him squirm in his seat. She could make him want her, surrender control to her. She smiled as she went over everything in her head again.

"You're quiet," he commented as he pulled the Porsche into the parking lot.

"Just thinking," she mused, not meeting his eyes as she spoke.

"Oh?" She could hear the smile in his voice.

"Yeah. You gonna tell me your little secret? The one you were talking about on the phone the other day?"

"The one that had you so pissed off?" There was no mistaking his tone. He wanted to drop the subject.

"That would be the one."

"It isn't important. Just know it's not as bad as it sounded. And trust me." The last was thrown in for good measure, she was sure. After their last encounter, there should be no question of trust between them. They had done more than have sex. They had bared their souls to one another in his office.

"Fine," she shrugged. "Let's eat."

He opened the door for her and led her into the pizza joint. It was really a full scale Italian restaurant with authentic food, but everyone in town called it a pizza joint. He led her through the door, his hand on the small of her back the whole time.

He's staking his claim, she thought when she watched him shake hands with the host. He requested an out of the way booth and was, of course, obliged.

Laura was thankful he'd wanted something quiet. Otherwise, her plan would have never worked. She let him lead her to the booth, and then she slipped in first.

The booth was all the way in the back of the place and was lit by a small chandelier hanging above it. It was a place for quiet dates, a place where people with kids only came if the kids were at home.

She felt her dress rise up as she moved across the leather seat. The fabric was cold against her bare ass. She'd foregone underwear tonight in favor of revenge. She couldn't wait to see the look on Ryan's face when he realized she was open, exposed beneath the cotton material of her dress.

He ordered wine for them while she concentrated on the sensations flowing through her body. She ached for him to touch her. In a matter of two days, he had turned her into a sex fiend. Just the thought of having his cock in her was enough to make her pussy quiver with anticipation.

She tried to concentrate on the menu as she sat there, tensing and relaxing her muscles. She could make herself come this way if she thought about it long enough, concentrated enough. Imagined him there. A shudder ran through her body.

"You okay tonight?" he brushed his shoulder against hers.

"I'm fine." She was thankful he had slid in behind her. It was as if he were playing right into her plan tonight. Now we'll see who's in control here, she thought.

"What are you in the mood for?"

She licked her lips when she looked up at him. He should see the answer written right there. He smiled. He knew exactly what was on her mind. "I don't know," she shrugged, causing the smile to tease up even further on his lips.

"I know what I want. They don't serve it here, though," his voice was hoarse, low. It sent another shiver through her. She shifted again on the leather seat.

"Maybe they will tonight." She shrugged again and looked away, pretending not to be interested.

"You know something I don't?"

"No. Just a guess."

Ryan's breath caught in his throat when she reached out to stroke his thigh. They were sitting practically shoulder to shoulder, but when she initiated the contact, it sent his mind reeling. He let out a low, slow growl. If she wasn't careful, he was likely to do a little exploring of his own.

"What do you want to eat?" She emphasized the last words even as she continued to look at the menu. And creep her fingers up his thigh. When she rested her hand against his crotch, he nearly jumped out of the booth.

"You," he growled against her ear.

"Mmmm. That can be arranged."

Without batting an eye, she raised up the edge of her dress, exposing the fact that she was bare beneath. His heart stopped when she put a hand under her dress and began touching herself. His dick reacted immediately.

"How's this?" She took a wet finger and pressed it against his lips. "Is that what you

wanted?" She batted her eyes innocently, but the motion was almost his undoing.

He took her finger deep into his mouth. "You're an evil woman," he licked at her fingertips then trailed his lips down to her wrist.

"You want some more?"

He nodded. This time, she moved the hem back, exposing to him her freshly shaved mound. She spread her legs wide so they pushed up against him on one side and the wall on the other. Then she moved down in her seat a little, giving him a perfect view of her swollen lips.

He'd never been with a woman who'd shaved her mound before, making the thought of sex with her later tonight one that he couldn't get out of his head. Just thinking of the feel of flesh against flesh was almost enough to make him come sitting right here staring at her.

When she shoved two fingers into her wet slit, he licked his lips. Eating her tonight was going to be top priority. He wondered how the smooth flesh would feel in his mouth, between his teeth.

This time, he took his time working at her fingers. He held them with his left hand while he let his right hand explore up her thigh. When he was almost there, seeking out her heat, she stopped him.

"You don't get to play," she scolded.

He let out an exasperated breath. This woman was going to be the death of him. Still, he took her fingers each time she dipped them into her sweetness, growing harder with each motion. She tasted like heaven. She was sweet, salty, sugary. He'd like to roll her in sugar and fuck the hell out of her. Aim for the wettest spot.

"Laura," he groaned. "I'm so hard."

"I can see that," she teased before she shifted around in the booth. She turned so that she was now sideways. Facing him. Then she leaned against the hard brick wall. The edge of her dress was well above her hips now. If the waiter were to come back, he'd get a hell of a show.

With one leg propped on the bench and one spread way out resting on the opposite bench, she began to rub her clit. He could see everything. She even raised herself up a little, letting him see her juices as they flowed out, coating her pussy.

"You know what I need?" she cooed.

"What do you need, baby?"

"I need something inside me."

God, she was bold. Sweet heaven, he was going to come sitting here watching her please herself in the restaurant.

"What do you want?" he managed between the short bursts of breath. He'd give her anything right now. All she had to do was tell him her wish and he'd give it to her and slide it up her pussy.

"Find something." Her eyes held a challenge for him. He was onto her game. She was trying to make him lose control. And hell if it wasn't working! He hadn't been this worked up since high school. He was enveloped by the sweet smell of her sweat and pussy.

The waiter came toward them now with the food. Rather than shifting like he thought she would, she simply pulled her dress back down, looking as casually as if she hadn't just been sitting there with her fingers in her cunt.

As soon as the waiter lay down the plates of food, Ryan knew exactly what he wanted to put inside of her. "Do you have a dessert menu I could see?"

The waiter eyed him warily before producing a menu. "You want to order dessert now?"

"Yeah. I thought it would be nice to go ahead and get it now," he shrugged as casually as he could. "Fruit salad."

"Yes, Sir," the waiter nodded.

Ryan learned how to eat left-handed. After the fruit salad was placed in front of him, he raised the edge of Laura's dress. Without looking, he began placing the grapes inside of her one by one. She gasped, her eyes searching his. She obviously hadn't expected this.

After the grapes were in place, Ryan started pushing the cherries in. One by one, he placed them into her opening and then let them pop on the other side. He shoved a finger in to make more room. He planned to fill her up and then slowly take each piece out when they got back home.

She wiggled in her seat with each touch. She was loving this. Her breath was ragged, tense. She was becoming wetter with each piece of fruit he shoved inside of her. And his dick was harder than it had ever been.

"I think when we get back home, I'm going to fuck you while you're still full," he commented, not looking at her as he said it. To the casual observer, they looked just like

a couple having dinner. No one would suspect he was stuffing her pussy with his own special blend of dessert.

"Ryan," her hand gripped his shirt, squeezing into the flesh on his arm. "You're gonna make me come," she warned.

"No. Not here." He moved his hand. "Now, be a good girl and finish your dinner. And we'll go home for dessert."

Laura was thankful she had practiced her Kegel exercises. God, she had been so afraid the fruit would pop right out of her on the way to the car. The pressure of being filled so completely was driving her insane. It felt as if his hand were inside her, moving, pulsing, cold, hot. God, it was all she could do to walk.

She started the night wanting to control him. Wanting to be the one to make him lose it. And he had turned the tables and she was once again at his mercy. God, but she loved it! She loved the way he took control of her body. She loved the way he made her feel. *She loved.* Oh, God.

"Come here, Laura," he coaxed her into the house. "I'm ready for my dessert now."

Her heart sank. She loved him. This big, beautiful, sexual animal. She met him on the sofa and let him lay her down. His kiss was sweet, soft. It belied the completely carnal encounter they had shared in the restaurant. It also belied what was coming next.

"I'm going to eat you," he breathed against her lips. "Are you gonna let me?"

She nodded her head wildly. "Yes, I'll let you." Her heart pounded. Her pussy ached, begging for release. She hadn't come in the restaurant. Every time she had gotten close, he had stopped her. Right now, he pressed against her, the rough cotton of his jeans torturing her bare flesh.

"Don't move." He warned, pushing his cock against her one last time before moving

away from her. It wasn't until he came back, spoon in hand, that she understood the extent to which he planned on eating.

The spoon was cold, as if it had been frozen. When he dipped it into her body, she felt fire sweep through her. He wiggled it around, coaxing out a come-covered grape. He popped it into his mouth, licking his lips when it disappeared.

"Incredible," he whispered, placing a kiss on her pussy before dipping his head down for another treat.

She pulled at his hair when he teased her with his chin. She was lost. She loved him; she craved him. She was out of her mind. All thought and reason had stopped. All she had was sensation.

He pulled a few more pieces of the fruit from her, teasing her with it, rubbing it along her lips before pushing it into her mouth. She could taste herself on it. God, it was the most sensual experience. The grape was warm, almost hot, and covered with a sauce even an ice cream goddess couldn't conjure without a man.

"I'm gonna leave some of it in you," he warned as he moved above her, placing himself at her opening.

"No, you can't." Could he?

"Yes, I can. I'll be careful, I promise. Trust me."

Trust him. Yes, she would trust him with her life. He slowly slipped into her, causing the remaining fruit to slide around. She was too full. God, so full she thought she wouldn't be able to take it when he fully entered her, pressing the fruit against her cervix. Carefully, he slid out all the way to the tip before easing back into her.

Their lovemaking was slow, the fruit slipping and sliding and rolling against her insides as he pulled away from her only to fill her again. Her juices ran out, coating her anus, making the cool air tease her skin.

She ran her hands up and down his chest, looking into his amazing blue eyes as he continued to take her. She would memorize this moment. Tomorrow, they may not have a business deal, may have no need for one another. But tonight, he was hers. And she loved him with everything she had.

Ryan wanted to take her with force, make her love him, make her feel every emotion that was ravaging his body as he moved so slowly it was killing him.

"I need you," he whispered against her ear.

"You've got me."

"No. I need more of you."

He pulled out of her and took the rest of the fruit from her body, flinging it to the side.

"How do you want me then? Do you want me on my knees sucking you or do you want me on my back, spread open for you? Or I could sit on the edge of the bed, bring it up to your face. Or I could bend over, ass in the air and let you lick me from behind." She twisted her nipples with her fingers as she spoke, causing the raspberry tips to harden and darken. "It's your choice."

He rolled her onto her stomach. "I want to take you from behind." In one motion, he had her in front of him, ass high in the air, her sweet little cunt glistening with the cream he had on his dick. She lowered her back and rested her head against the bed. He watched as her hands moved around to her ass, spreading her lips wide for him.

"Want me to hold it open for you?"

He watched as she slid in a finger from each hand, holding herself open even wider. Dropping to his knees, he buried his face into the folds she held open for him. Her sweet honey poured out as soon as he began to suck. He darted his tongue in and out, licking her fingers, which were still buried inside of her, holding her wide open for him.

He ran his face along her wet warmth, reveling in the feel of her juices on his nose, his chin, his tongue. She bucked against him, fucking him as he rubbed with a greater intensity.

"You want to fuck me, don't you?"

Yes, he wanted to fuck her! Wanted to bury himself up to his balls inside of her. Wanted to feel those tight muscles fist around him. He slid three fingers into her, reveling at how tight she was even though she now had both her hands and his inside of her. She squirmed against him.

"Do me like that and I'll suck you," she coaxed.

"Move your hands."

She took her hands out of her pussy and it immediately closed around him, tightening back as if she were a virgin. He felt her hand reach down to stroke her clit while she reached back with the other and grabbed his cock. She began stroking him as his hand moved in and out of her. Her juices spilled out around his fingers, her cream coating them, filling the air with her woman scent. Her cunt sang to him as he continued to fuck her with his fingers.

"I want to suck you." She pulled away from him in spite of the tight hold he had on her ass.

"Roll over," he commanded.

She did. But instead of lying flat on her back like he wanted, legs spread wide, she kneeled in front of him. "You're not in charge anymore."

He opened his mouth to protest, but when her angel tongue lapped the pearls off his dick, he lost all train of thought. She opened her mouth wide, taking him all the way in. Her hand, still wet from her juices, grabbed his balls and gave them a squeeze.

Now, her mouth and hand moved together up and down his shaft. It was almost like fucking two women at once, the way she completely covered him, leaving no piece of flesh untouched at any given moment.

Her lovely head moved back and forth, shaking her hair into her face as she coaxed him toward orgasm. He braced himself on her shoulders as his balls tightened.

The growl that ripped through his body echoed the intensity of his come shooting against the roof of her mouth then sliding down her throat. She continued to milk him, bringing him to his knees as the effects of their love play still raged through his body. When she was satisfied, she kissed his purple tip and then looked up him with a satisfied smile.

"Now, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything," he said breathlessly.

"Fuck me."

He rolled her back onto her stomach. "Raise your ass for me."

She did as he commanded. He swore her pussy winked at him when he positioned himself behind her, his hands gripping her ass. His dick was already hard in spite of his orgasm, in spite of the soreness from fucking her while she was filled with fruit. He

pressed it against her opening and then filled her to the hilt, his balls resting against her swollen clit where her fingers were working frantically to bring her to release.

He slapped them against her hand, against her soft, smooth flesh while he fucked her. Her ass was begging to be filled, teasing him, the sweet rosette calling out to his fingers. He licked one finger and then positioned it at her tiny opening. She gasped when it entered her ass. Her entire back went rigid as he pressed it further in. God, she was tight around him!

When she relaxed, she began to buck against him, letting him take her pussy, her ass with the wild abandon he had wanted all night. She screamed, clawed at the sheets, twisted her ass and pussy and still he continued to fuck her. They came quickly, furiously. Two bodies shuddering in the moonlight, desperate for one another. Desperate for the feelings they hoped didn't disappear in the morning.

Ryan shuddered and held onto her as the last of his cream pulsed into her, coating her insides. When she collapsed against the bed, he cradled her in his arms and swore he'd never let her go.

Chapter Ten

Laura smiled as she dipped her finger into the banana split ice cream. She had waited all week for this. She brought her finger to her lips, trying not to think about the man who inspired this particular blend.

She closed her eyes as the ice cream hit her tongue. She gave it a second before spitting it in the sink. "Yuck!" Bitter banana was not an appealing taste. She opened the freezer and pulled out the other test batches she had used Ryan's sugar in. She peeled the lids off the remaining containers, dipping a spoon into each one and giving them all a taste. The second one was even worse, causing her to spit the mouthful of ice cream into a napkin. Her stomach sank. The ice cream didn't support whatever it was Ryan had done to the sugar. And she had to break the news to him, knowing it would damn near destroy him.

She stood there staring at the containers, her arms braced by the countertop. How was she going to tell him that this business arrangement of theirs wouldn't work?

Her heart sank. Ryan's entire future rested on his sugar substitute. He probably didn't even know it wouldn't hold up to mass production. What could he have possibly made with it?

She remembered the iced tea. It had been great there. But then again, it had only been in the mixture for a few minutes before they drank it. Maybe he could make cotton candy with it. That would be a novel idea.

She sighed. She knew he would be here any minute. He had been waiting on the results of the ice cream as eagerly as she had. Laura didn't think she could look him in the eyes and tell him his product hadn't worked.

"Laura," Amanda was on the intercom.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Ryan is here."

"Okay. Can you let him in?"

"Sure."

Great. She took another deep breath. She had to tell him it didn't work. She braced

herself, knowing that when the door opened, he would be standing there.

Ryan had been anxiously awaiting today for several reasons. The ice cream was really just an excuse to see Laura again. He hadn't been able to sleep last night with her body pressed against his. Hadn't been able to do much except focus on what had happened between them.

He was ready to see her again when Amanda led her down the hallway to the lab. When his eyes met hers, he realized he wasn't prepared for the emotions that hit him at once.

"Ryan," she looked past him to Amanda and nodded her head. Amanda smiled and left him standing there.

"Laura, you look incredible," he smiled, running his gaze up and down her jean-clad body. Her dark stare was a surprise to him. He had expected to see a tiny light in her eyes or something. Her face was practically blank.

"Ryan, I need to talk to you."

"I need to talk to you, too." This was encouraging. Sort of. She offered him one of the barstools and he sat down.

"Me first," she lowered her eyes. "Ryan, the sugar didn't work."

"What do you mean it didn't work?"

"I mean it didn't work. It broke down when it mixed with my chemicals."

"Then there's something wrong with your mixtures. Maybe you measured wrong."

"I didn't measure wrong."

"Let me see." He grabbed the container sitting in front of her and tasted it. What the hell was this stuff? "It's bitter."

"I know."

"What did you put in it?"

"The same as I always do. Here, try this one," she slid another container toward him. He scooped it up and took a bite. He tested all the samples she had, but they were all the same.

"I'm sorry," she shrugged.

"Sorry." He raked his fingers through his curly hair then narrowed his eyes at her. "Was this part of the plan?"

"What plan?"

He stalked across the room toward her, his eyes burning into her. "To get a hold of my product, my business." He gripped her arms firmly with his hands, causing her to shudder against him.

"I didn't do anything different," she insisted as she pulled away from him. He released her, trying to get a grip, trying to think.

"I think you did. Or maybe you did something wrong."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." He turned to walk away, but she stopped him, pulling him around to face her.

"Oh, no, buddy. You tell me what you think I'm doing. Do you think I'm sabotaging you?"

"I don't know," he sank down onto the barstool as he spoke. He really didn't know what he thought she was doing. All he knew was he was angry and she was there, an easy target, somebody to lash out at. He looked down at his hands then back up at her. "

Who knows? I don't know how women think," he shrugged.

"I think you're being a big baby."

"Oh really?" he folded his arms.

"Yeah, really. Your background is in business, not in chemistry. How were you to know how this would react?"

"I tested it. What? You think I just decided one day that I had the formula?"

"No, I..."

"I put a lot of work into this. And if it doesn't work in your product, then I can't help it."

"What did you test it in?"

"Nothing you would understand," he stood, raked a hand through his hair. He hated himself right now. Hated that he was directing all this at her. Hated that the last thing he wanted to do was argue about sugar. But what he really despised was the fact that his entire future just crashed and burned right before his eyes.

"I have no doubt about that."

"Since you and I have no more to discuss, I'll see you around." He turned to walk away and then stopped at the door. He took the formula from his pocket, ripped it in half and threw it into the trashcan. Good riddance. He'd find another way out.

"We have a hell of a lot more to discuss." She leapt to her feet, hands on hips, but he wasn't ready to face down the challenge in her face.

She wasn't going to make this easy. What could they possibly have to discuss? He had no future, no future! Didn't she understand that? Didn't she get it? Everything he had was mixed up in that God-awful ice cream. "Laura, I can't." He softened his voice, but it didn't help the situation any. Her eyes were still focused on him, demanding something he just couldn't give her.

"Can't what?"

"Can't do this. Any of it." Even if all he wanted to do was fall into her arms and let her love away the pain.

Ryan stomped out of the lab. He would have kicked the Porsche when he got to it, but it was his only insurance policy. And he couldn't get much out of it. Maybe a hundred thousand or so. It was a vintage car, after all.

He turned the key in the ignition and listened to the engine purr. Blake had good taste in cars if nothing else. He took in a deep breath. He had to call his brother and tell him he had no choice but to sell the business.

He pulled the car out of the parking lot, trying not to think about Laura. His stomach hurt. It was the kind of dull ache he got when he had done something really bad. He remembered getting it regularly as a kid. It had been a while since he'd felt it as an adult. Seeing the look on her face when he accused her of screwing around with his formula was enough to do it to him, though. He hurt her today and he hadn't even been man enough to apologize.

That thought alone made his heart sink. Something had happened between them that he wasn't quite ready to put a name on. It was something he remembered only from dreams and wishes. Nothing he had ever truly experienced.

He loved her. He had to face it. Somewhere in the night, he swore he even

whispered it to her. He loved her. God, he was an idiot!

* * * * *

A week later, Cate stood in front of Laura, hands on hips, whining, trying to convince Laura to go to the annual fireworks display that she had no interest in whatsoever. What she wanted to do was crawl back in bed and forget the fact that she'd neither seen nor heard from Ryan since he stormed out of her lab.

"Come on, Laura."

"I'm not up to it." Laura stood in the doorway, arms folded, her face a mask of determination. She wasn't leaving the house today.

"It'll be fun," Cate crooned.

"I'm not interested in fun."

"Then maybe you could tell me why. You know, cousin to cousin?"

"There's nothing to tell. Will you leave me alone already?" a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. Cate rolled her eyes.

"You want to do it. It'll be fun," she coaxed again.

"You said that already."

"Tell me, have you ever been to the fireworks display?"

"No, I haven't."

"It's for a good cause." Cate knew her cousin's weaknesses. Laura was a sucker for a good cause.

"And what's that, to help you hook up with Dusty Bayonne?"

"No. But I promise it's a good cause. And who knows, maybe Dusty will be there, too."

"I knew he had something to do with it." Cate's crush on Dusty was practically legendary. Everyone knew about it except Mr. Obvious, who seemed to have missed the fact.

"Come on. Robin and Karen are going, too. We'll meet them there. It'll be fun. A girl's night out. Besides, you owe us for skipping ice cream night."

At the mention of "ice cream night," Laura's face flushed.

She'd spent most of the day trying not to think about Ryan LeJeune. But she was right about one thing. Ryan wasn't a chemist. She had seen the formula, having fished it out of the trashcan. And had spent the last several days working on it in spite of how she knew he would feel about it. Her breakthrough had come two nights ago. But she had yet to tell Ryan about it, not knowing how he would react. She wanted him to thank her, to appreciate what she had done, but she was afraid he would be angry that she had done this behind his back. Memories from their first night together flooded her mind. He had done something to her that night. Transformed her. And now she knew the truth about him. He was a typical male.

"I didn't feel well," she reminded Cate, suddenly feeling her stomach twisting in a knot again. She would give anything if she could get Ryan out of her head. She hadn't heard from him since the day in her lab. And, to be honest, she missed him, which had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact she feared she was falling in love with him.

"I know. But you feel fine tonight. It'll do you good to get out."

"Are you gonna leave if I say yes?"

"Yeah, I'll leave. But I'll be back at seven to pick you up."

"Fine," she threw up her hands in frustration. "I'll go. But I'm taking my car."

"Great," Cate squealed. "It'll be so much fun."

No, it wouldn't. Laura turned back and went into her empty house. She had been so filled with hope before her entire world came crashing down. She didn't want to go to the fireworks display tonight. She didn't want to do anything but sit around and sulk.

Fireworks only made her think about things she knew wouldn't happen again. Ryan hadn't called, letting her know he obviously didn't care about her as much as she cared for him. So it had only been a week. That was practically a lifetime when her heart ached so badly and she feared she was falling in love—no, had already fallen in love with—someone who didn't love her in return. The last thing she wanted to do tonight was spend her time downtown watching lovers cuddled together watching the annual display of lights in the sky.

Fireworks had always reminded her of her favorite fantasy, one she knew would never come true. As the sparks went into the air, they always made her long for a romantic interlude on a secluded terrace with the man of her dreams.

The mystery lover always wore black. A mask covered his face, but she could still see his eyes. She closed her eyes, remembering the fantasy. He was standing beneath the moonlight, waiting, watching her approach. His black clothing blended into the night sky as she stepped out onto the terrace, carefully avoiding contact with him. Standing just inches from him, she always felt the heat radiating from his body, the intensity of his passion for her smoldering in eyes that were fixed on her bare shoulder. His red lips turned up in a smile, and he took her into his arms.

As she drew closer, she realized his eyes were blue. And his long hair wasn't straight as it had always been. It was dark and curly. It was the kind of hair made for tangling her fingers in and around and using it as leverage for a heart-pounding kiss.

She leaned against the front door. It had been a while since she'd had a fantasy like this. She tried to shake it from her mind, but her mystery lover—she could still pretend she didn't know who he was—was standing there beckoning her.

"Come closer, Laura," his Southern drawl echoed across the distance.

She shook her head, wanting to flee, but knowing she was trapped by his hypnotic eyes. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am. I am the monster you created." When he smiled, she caught a glimpse of his white teeth. The same teeth she wanted trailing tiny bites across her tender neck and traveling further down.

"I don't know you," she protested, her hand slipping up around her throat to protect it from his lips, which were slowly descending upon hers.

Laura shook herself. God, she needed to get out of here. Needed to get to work. Ryan may not be interested in saving his company thanks to the male pride standing in his way, but she didn't have that same handicap. And she knew she could fix his product if he'd only give her a chance.

She glanced at her watch, trying to ignore the growing dampness between her thighs. She could put sex out of her mind for a couple of hours, couldn't she? She had

lived this long without it. It was already five o'clock. The day had slipped away after Ryan left the lab. She didn't have time to go back to the lab, work and come home and get ready for tonight.

She let out a curse and headed for the freezer, hoping she still had some cherry ice cream on hand.

* * * * *

Ryan hung up the phone. He couldn't do it, couldn't sell the company. Instead, he and Blake worked out a deal over the past week. Blake would come back into town, bring his inheritance with him and work side by side with his brother to bring the company back to where it needed to be. And Ryan would give this whole sugar thing another try. The first thing he had to do, though, was find Laura.

He was an ass, having left her the way he had. He felt like a damned fool, knowing he didn't deserve her forgiveness, but hoping to God she would see it in herself to allow him to apologize. He picked up the phone and waited for his cousin, Dusty, to answer.

"I was just about to call you," Dusty said when he picked up the phone.

"Is everything set for tonight?"

"Yeah, it's set, and you owe me big time."

"I know I do."

"So, the key will be in your hand in less than an hour. And Cate's taking care of

bringing your girl there."

"She isn't my girl yet."

"Yeah, but she will be. Have faith, man. It'll work out."

Ryan sure as hell hoped it would work out. The townhouse on the river didn't come cheap. If it hadn't been for the loan from his cousin, Ryan would never have been able to afford the night of groveling he had planned. He had really screwed things with her. All it took was returning to his empty house to realize he needed Laura in a way he never needed anyone before.

"I can't figure out this damned tie," Ryan cursed as Dusty walked into the house an hour later.

Dusty laughed, "You look like you're getting married all dolled up."

"And you look like the king of the dead. When was the last time you slept? Help me," he raised his neck so Dusty could tie the bow tie.

"There. Don't say I never did anything for you," he teased. "I was out late last night. Had a late trip to New Orleans."

"You go there a lot." Ryan examined the results in the mirror. "Thanks, man. Where'd you learn how to tie a bow tie? Hey, I look pretty sharp."

"You clean up pretty good."

"So about this tie. Where'd you learn to tie one? They teach you that in aviation school?"

"I have my ways," Dusty leaned against the doorframe.

"Yeah well ways like that really get to women. You planning on seducing one anytime soon?"

"No, I'm not."

"You know Cate's got the hots for you."

"She's a kid."

Ryan noted how Dusty didn't look up at him as he spoke. "Well, you watch yourself. Those Reynolds girls have their ways."

"They sure do. If one of 'em could convince you to put on a monkey suit, I wonder what they'd do to the rest of us."

"Well you better watch out."

"Nothing to watch for." Dusty assured him.

"Cate's twenty-three. She's stable; she's got a good job, a hell of a business mind from what I've heard. And she's hot."

"She's a kid," he repeated, this time with much less zeal.

"She's two years younger than you. Open your eyes, buddy. You're gonna miss what's right in front of you."

"You're one to talk."

"I know. And I plan on doing something about it. Now, you got the keys?"

Dusty handed over the silver key chain. "You got until eleven tomorrow. And you owe me big time."

"I know, I know," he swung the keys on his finger and hoped Cate could track Laura down. This was going to be a night to remember.

Chapter Eleven

Laura folded the note, concentrating on placing a crease down the center. Ryan wanted to talk. The whole concept of meeting Cate at the fireworks had been a set up from the start. After she drove up and parked the car just on the outskirts of the downtown barricade, Cate met her, note in hand, and pointed her toward one of the exclusive riverfront townhouses, which was always occupied by the tourists who came into Oak Creek with the Christmas season. Since it was July, they were abandoned except for the one reserved for her for tonight.

I want to say I'm sorry, the note declared. Ryan apologizing? Her heart stirred at the thought, while her tears built in her eyes. She'd felt so many emotions lately, she really didn't want to get her hopes up. Maybe he was just after sex. They were good together in that department. But she needed more from him than sex. She wanted his heart.

Soft music played in the background as she stepped inside the townhouse, surprised by the candlelight that greeted her. Rose petals were strewn at the door, leading into the small living room and out of the French doors. She took in a deep breath, thankful Cate warned her to dress up tonight. Magic permeated the air, making her feel as if anything were possible. Her heart raced as she stepped out onto the terrace.

There he was, her fantasy lover, holding a glass of red wine and looking at her as if he had just lost his best friend. Good. She hoped he had suffered as much as she had. Hoped all this wasn't just an apology, but a fresh start. A delightful shiver ran up her back as he smiled at her.

He started walking toward her. Stalking. Mesmerizing. Okay, he looked pretty damned good, but the fantasy playing in her head really helped with the effect.

"Well, I'm here." She folded her arms, wanting him to work for the forgiveness.

"I see that." He held out the glass of wine.

"Did you want something?"

"Yeah, I did. First, I wanted to show you something."

"What's that?"

"I have arranged an elaborate fireworks display for you tonight." He used a mock British accent before sweeping an arm out over the edge of the terrace toward the lake.

"All by your little self?" She couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah, all by myself. Come stand near the edge."

"You aren't afraid I'll push you over?"

"I'll have to take that chance."

She took a long sip of her wine and then approached the edge of the terrace. Her eyes closed and she inhaled his scent when he moved to stand behind her and wrap his arms around her. Resting her head against his chest, she listened to his heartbeat and tried not to think about how perfect this felt.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her bare shoulder. "Will you forgive me?" She turned and looked up into his soft eyes.

"We have to talk," she began, only to be interrupted when he lowered his mouth to hers.

She sucked in her breath, inhaling him as she clung to his arms. A shudder ran through her when his tongue burned a trail down her neck.

His teeth grazed against her flesh, instantly making her wet. She had never had an orgasm just by being touched on the neck. But this was no mere touch. If Ryan possessed fangs, he would have just stolen her life force. As it was, he caused a fierce orgasm to build.

She gasped for breath, trying to pull away from him. The sensation was too much. She didn't want to give him this much control over her. Especially after their last encounter. They needed to talk. The need to understand the extent of his apology burned inside her. She couldn't just fall into his arms and have everything be okay. Refusing to be one of those weak women who gave in to a sexy man, she reached up to push him away at the same time that his hand slid down the side of her throat and found her breast. All thoughts ceased when he slipped it inside her top, squeezing the edges of one breast and then moving in for the nipple. When his fingers found the already hardened bud, he pinched it, causing her to break into a series of tremors.

"Are you wet for me?" he whispered against her ear.

"Yes," she could barely make out the word.

"I don't believe you," he teased. He gathered the material of her dress, bunching it up around her hips. He dropped to his knees, pushing her legs apart as he moved.

Standing stock still, anticipating the feel of his lips on her, she braced herself by putting her hands in his hair. And holding on for dear life.

"You're beautiful," he whispered against her lace panties. Holding the dress out of his way, he put his teeth around the waistband of her underwear and pulled them down her thighs.

"Ryan," she clung to him as he let her panties slip to the floor. She stepped out of them and gasped when he brought them to his nose.

"You smell like ice cream." He smiled up at her. "I bet you taste like ice cream, too."

When he ducked his head between her thighs, she let out a moan. As his tongue began to work on her clit, she lost all logical thought. All she could do was feel. Feel him. He probed, he teased. He licked, sucked, all the while driving her insane.

"I want to fuck you," he whispered against her delicate flesh.

"Not here." Panic seized her voice. What if the people on the other side of the lake could see them? What if the people below on the streets looked up?

"Yes, here."

"No one will see us," he promised.

"But..."

"No. No buts. You are mine," he pulled her into him. "And I intend to have you."

His. She was aching, pulsing, wanting.

She closed her eyes, remembering her fantasy. Then she opened and looked into his eyes as he stared up at her.

He pulled himself back up and pushed her against the terrace railing before lifting her dress once more. The thought of being caught made her feel wicked and wild. The night breeze caught her scent carrying it up to her nose while the wind tickled her pussy, caressing it like a lover.

"Not here," she protested again, the thought of their last encounter against a railing flashing through her mind.

"Why not?"

"Your porch," she reminded him.

He laughed before sweeping her into his arms. "I had forgotten about that."

"Well I hadn't. And I don't wish to be splattered against the sidewalk."

"We'd land in the water."

"Whatever. Can we take this inside?"

"You know how to ruin a moment," he teased before kicking open the door and carrying her inside.

The bedroom was as romantic as the rest of the place. Though he had foregone the rose petals, Ryan had lit several candles, casting a beautiful glow across the antique bed. The room was nice, but her main focus was on the man whose arms were wrapped around her in a way that threatened to destroy every last bit of resistance she may have had. She needed more from him than an apology and amazing sex. She needed commitment.

When he lowered her to the bed and her skin came into contact with the soft covering, her need for him overpowered everything else. They could talk in the morning. Or later tonight. Right now, she wanted to feel him. Her fingers worked at his tie, revealing his golden skin bit by bit as she removed it and then opened his shirt buttons.

She sucked in her breath and bit her bottom lip when he rose above her, giving her access, letting her hands roam across his chest. He had the most amazing chest. The combination of his cologne and sheer maleness was enough to send her senses into overdrive, permeating her brain and her body with his intoxicating aroma. She dipped her head in for a taste of his skin, inhaling as she ran her tongue along his hardened muscles.

He visibly shook when she made contact, only delighting her even further. He didn't speak, but she heard the sharp intake of breath when her teeth captured first one nipple and then the other. Surrender. He was surrendering to her, she knew. This was all part of the apology, of the realization that there was more going on than either of them thought, wasn't it? Otherwise, a man like Ryan LeJeune wouldn't be able to give up control the way he was now.

Testing him, she pulled him into her, letting his skin rub against her dress while she

slowly rolled him onto his back. She'd like to see him surrender control just as she had. Opening his shirt more fully, she began her exploration anew, first teasing his neck and then moving down to his nipples. She sat astride him, feeling the heat coming from his crotch as his cock pressed against her through his pants. It was time for him to be completely naked.

The fireworks started somewhere in the background, the first explosion causing her breath to catch in her throat and her fingers to still. She laughed, realizing it was silly to be afraid of a couple of loud noises. She ran her tongue down to his navel before unbuttoning his pants and slipping her hand inside.

His cock was more than ready for exploration, practically jumping when her hand closed around it. He groaned, causing her to smile. She dared look up at him, knowing looking into his eyes could make or break the moment. Eye to eye contact was a very intimate gesture. Would he look away? No, he didn't. His eyes held hers as she began massaging his length, running her hands slowly up and down, caressing the tip then going lower to where it connected.

She wanted to stroke him, make him come with her hand, but first she wanted him undressed. Her hand felt cold when she pulled it from his pants and moved down to remove his shoes and socks. Throwing them into a pile on the floor, she pulled his pants down and tossed them aside as well. He'd foregone underwear, a concept she found to be extremely exciting.

"Now, what should I do with you?" she teased as she climbed back up his body and trapped his legs, holding them to the bed with her weight.

"What do you want to do with me?" His voice was sexy and low, causing another delightful shiver to run through her body.

He gasped when she took him into her mouth without warning, rewarding her with the response she'd hoped for. She cupped his balls with one hand while she stroked his shaft with the other, all the while working her tongue around the head of his cock. Her new power was making her even wetter than she had been before. Moaning as she took him further into her mouth, she began grinding herself against his legs, wishing she'd had the forethought to take off her clothes before she began.

Taking him into her mouth as deep as she could, she began moving him in and out, taking him deep and then releasing all but the very tip then taking him in again. Her head bobbed up and down and her hips writhed in circles as she continued to pleasure him, and herself. Her clit stood at attention, having been rubbed against his hard legs, and her orgasm was on the brink of exploding right along with the fireworks. When she finally felt herself teetering on the edge, she released his cock and pulled her dress off over her head.

Taking control of him had been too much. Now, she wanted to give him control, wanted him on top of her, inside her. He sat up, as if he instinctually knew what she needed. She clung to him while they changed positions with him on top of her, his bare chest brushing against hers.

She opened for him when he lowered himself to her. His penis pressed against her wetness, asking for an invitation. When she arched her back, granting permission, he drove himself into her.

"Look at me," he coaxed.

When she looked into his eyes, she knew she would never be the same. He had transformed her, making her need him in a way she'd never needed anyone before. She

saw her soul reflected in there and knew that the only thing she wanted was to be with him.

"I love you," she whispered against his skin as he moved slowly inside her. He didn't answer, but she knew he had to feel the same way. She felt it in his slow movements, in the way he took his time bringing her to the edge with his hands, his mouth, his cock. There was nothing rushed this time.

She held onto him, almost afraid to let go as he drove her to a place she'd never known before. She moaned, delighting in the way it sounded to moan against him. To be merged with him. To have her juices flowing all around him, whispering a seductive melody as they squeezed and flowed and slid around him.

"I'm gonna come," he grunted.

"Come inside me," she begged.

When his orgasm shot out against her inner walls, she swore she whispered her love to him again. As she arched her back into him, she thought she heard the words on the air between them. But she couldn't have said it. He may have apologized to her tonight, may have taken her beyond the edge of anywhere she'd ever gone before, but he didn't tell her he loved her back.

* * * * *

There's a saying in Louisiana. If you don't like the weather, wait. It'll be different tomorrow. Summer was thunderstorm season, and this latest one had come up during the night with practically no warning. Eight A.M. looked more like midnight by the time Ryan rolled out of bed. Laura was already in the shower if the sound of running water was any indication.

He let out a groan when his feet hit the cold, wooden floor. The real world was going to close back in on him today. Last night may have been the most amazing night of his life, but today nothing had changed. He was still on the verge of losing his business, even if Blake swore he'd be back in town before the end of the month. And his sugar deal with Laura had fallen through, thanks to a flaw in his formula. And then there was that matter of his heart.

He loved Laura. He knew he did. But something inside him protested last night when she whispered the words to him. Maybe it was fear of committing another marital mistake. Maybe it was fear of that soft look in her eyes when she said it. Whatever it was, it prevented him from returning the words, something he knew she both needed and expected.

They were more than lovers. What they shared, few people on earth had experienced. Making love to her was like coming home, in a good way, not in the coming-home-and-the-electricity-is-off way. In a way that made everything feel good and right and new. But he still couldn't say the words.

He listened as the shower turned off. He'd have to face her now and face what he couldn't say. Watching her walk into the room, knowing she expected it was one of the most difficult things he'd ever done. And she looked magnificent this morning with her hair up in a blue towel and her face freshly scrubbed.

"Good morning," she said with what he thought sounded like a hint of iciness in her

tone.

"Good morning," he smiled, but he knew a smile wasn't what she wanted. Why did women have to be so needy? Why couldn't they just accept sex and all that went along with it without demanding a commitment?

"You sleep well?"

She hadn't touched him yet, hadn't moved in for a morning kiss. His first response to her question was yeah, he slept like a baby snuggled in her arms. His brain protested.

Why hadn't she kissed him? "I slept fine. Did you?"

"Yeah. I had a dream last night."

Here we go. *Dreaming of you and me and babies*. Let's hear it. "Oh?"

"Yeah. And I know what's wrong with your formula. I can fix it."

"Oh? How do you know what's in the formula?"

"I saved it from the trash that day that you got so mad," she shrugged.

"And you dug it out?" He folded his arms, knowing he should be angry, but the only thing he wanted to do right now was hold her.

"Yeah. So if you don't mind," she grabbed her dress from last night, "I'm going to go to the lab today."

"It's storming outside." He tried not to protest too loudly, but none of this was how he had it played out in his mind.

"I know. It storms all the time. Besides, I'm sure you have work to do today, too."

"It's Saturday." How could she want to work all day when the only thing he wanted to do was snuggle up next to her?

"I know, but if I can get the formula fixed today and get the new ice cream into the freezer, it'll save us some time." She pulled her dress on and took her wet hair down from the towel. "Tell me you brought a brush with you."

He pointed to the dresser, trying to hide his disappointment. He felt like a rejected teenager thanks to the huge lump growing inside his chest. His eyes were on her back as she worked the brush through her mass of wet hair. He wanted his fingers there, wanted to pull her back into bed with him.. Wanted to keep her here.

"I'll come by your place later, okay?"

"Sure. I mean, I should be there." He knew he had nowhere else to go, but he wanted to leave her wondering. "Are you sure you don't want to stay just until the storm blows over?"

"I'll be fine, Ryan. I grew up here, remember? A little thunder never hurt anybody."

When she leaned in to kiss him, he wanted to pull her into him, hold onto her forever. Instead, he sat stone still as she brushed her lips against him. He didn't move until he heard the door slam.

Laura tried to put last night out of her mind and just get down to business today. The truth was, she needed to get away from Ryan as soon as she possibly could. Last night had been amazing. She walked through the rain to her car, which Ryan had moved for her last night, parking it just outside the townhouse. She sat there for a minute, just staring ahead, wondering what exactly she had expected from him.

She knew she meant something to him. She had to. If she didn't, she wasn't sure how she'd go on. Okay, so he hadn't told her he loved her. Did she really expect him to do it

so soon? Guys didn't work like that, did they? They had to take time to analyze a situation, ignore their instincts and examine everything until it all but fell apart due to the scrutiny.

She took in a deep breath. The last thing she wanted to do was go to the lab today. Besides, she already had the solution to Ryan's problem. She knew the work she had done on the formula was sufficient. As for her feelings for him, there was no solution to that problem. And she didn't know what to say to him this morning. So, she decided to give him an out. She'd leave gracefully and if he came after her, she'd figure out what to do from there. If he didn't... He had to, didn't he?

Her house was cold and empty this morning, making her wish she'd stayed in the cozy townhouse with Ryan. She dropped her keys on the table by the door and made her way to her bedroom to change into something more suitable for work. Jeans and a T-shirt would do, especially since she had no idea what she'd do once she got there. A few solutions came to mind, none of which were definite. What she'd need to do was try each one and see what worked. And surely one of them would. If not, Ryan could always sell the sugar as a soft drink sweetener. It would sell like crazy in the South for iced tea.

The rain was really picking up and the thunder and lightning were increasing. When the last bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, she counted, waiting for the thunder, but she knew the answer already, knew that the worst of the storm was right overhead. Still, she didn't want to be at home alone all day. Her every instinct told her to turn back and head for Ryan's place, give him a chance to tell her he loved her, but her stubborn streak wasn't ready for a disappointment right now.

An amazing night should be enough for her. She didn't *need* a commitment. She wasn't that kind of woman, was she?

She passed the turn off to Ryan's house, a little dirt road off the side of the main dirt road, both of which were more red mud now than anything else. And fought every instinct that told her to turn off, go see if he was home. Just as she rounded the next curve, she realized she wasn't going any further.

"Great." Apparently, somebody had plans for her today that didn't involve going to the lab. A giant pine tree lay across the road, blocking access into town. This was the downfall of living down a country road on the outskirts of town with one way in and one way out.

She managed to turn the car around without getting it stuck or running into the ditch, but by the time she made it back to Ryan's turn off, the rain had picked up so much that she couldn't see in front of her face. Her windshield wipers were useless. She muttered a curse before giving in.

"Okay, okay, I'll go see if he's home."

"Laura, you're soaked." Ryan opened the screen door and pulled her into the house.

"I'm fine," she protested, allowing him to lead her into the living room.

"What the hell are you doing? I thought you were in town." He placed her by the sofa just as the lights flickered off. "Stay here. I'll find you something dry to wear."

Rummaging through Blake's clothes, he came up with a pair of sweatpants that would be way too big and a Ragin' Cajuns T-shirt. He also grabbed a couple of towels from the bathroom.

"Here." He handed the pile to her, trying to hide his relief at seeing her. Ever since the storm picked up, he fought every urge he had to either drive out to her place or drive into town and find her. "You can just step into the kitchen to change if you want. It'll be easier than trying to maneuver the stairs in the dark. Here," he dug a flashlight from a drawer and handed it to her, avoiding skin-on-skin contact.

She nodded and obeyed. "Thanks. I didn't realize the storm had gotten so bad."

"Shit," he raked a hand through his hair, gripped with panic now that he knew she was okay. He should have gone out and checked on her earlier. "Are you sure you're okay?" he called.

"Fine," she called out just before coming back into the room. "These are nice," she held out her arms and then showed him her very well covered legs.

"They're Blake's. I figured they'd be too big. Come here, let's get you warmed up," he moved to pull her into his arms, but she ducked.

"I'm fine. Really. I came over because there's a tree in the road and I couldn't go anywhere else."

His heart sank. He wanted her to be here because she wanted to be with him, wanted him to protect her from the storm. That wasn't like Laura, though. She could protect herself. He wanted to pull her into him and tell her he loved her. He was ready now to say the words he couldn't say last night. Having her standing in front of him was all the encouragement he needed. Everything inside him had changed this morning when she left, forcing him to admit that she was the one. "You didn't have to have a tree in the way to come over."

"There was no need for you to rush to my rescue." Her sarcasm bit into him, and he flinched at her words.

"It's not like that. I just assumed..."

"Yeah, well I'm fine. Wet, but fine."

"I'm glad you're here. We need to talk." He shoved his hands into his pockets. Where to begin? There was so much he needed to tell her. So many things he needed to know. Did she really love him?

"Yeah we do."

This didn't sound good. He started toward the kitchen. "Let me get you some coffee or something."

"Do you have any tea?"

"Yeah. I do. And a gas stove, so you're in luck."

"Ryan, I need to talk to you. About your formula."

He motioned for her to sit at the table. "I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about us." "I lied earlier. I've been playing around with the formula since the day you left it.

And I have the solution."

"Oh." Why would she lie about something like that?

"I told you that so I could leave. I wanted to have a graceful exit, so I told you I was going to the lab. The truth is..." She stopped and looked up at him. He saw the tears building in her eyes.

"Stop, Laura. You don't have to explain. I just need to know something."

"What's that?"

That ache in his chest was growing. She told him last night that she loved him. Why he was afraid of asking, he wasn't sure. "Last night. Did you, uh, mean that?"

"Mean what?"

It felt as if she were twisting a knife into his heart. He crossed the kitchen, the tea forgotten, and sank to his knees. "I'm in love with you." The words came out before he could stop himself, but the heaviness in his heart instantly lifted. It felt good to be honest with her about his feelings. Now, if she would repeat those words to him, everything would be fine.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I am. And I hope you love me, too." He looked into her eyes as he spoke, searching for an answer in there somewhere, hoping the mask she wore would soften.

A tear rolled down her cheek just before she slid down onto the floor next to him.

"I do love you, too. I just didn't want you to think I expected anything out of you."

"Even if you did?"

"Even if I did."

He stood and pulled her to her feet, hauling her flush against him, cupping her ass in his hands, grinding her with his cock, which had been loaded and ready practically from the second she set foot in the house.

Her mouth opened for him, allowing him to probe inside. Allowing him to fill her with the love he felt for her. She twisted her fingers into his hair, capturing him and holding him hostage with her kiss. He loved the way her hands felt in his hair, the way she deepened the kiss. Everything about her.

"Your kettle's boiling," she pulled away when the whistle sounded.

"To hell with it," he mumbled as he took her lips with his.

He had never been good at showing emotions. Especially not when they were this deep. To tell the truth, he'd never felt anything like this before. And it had scared him more than a little to have her tell him she loved him last night.

"I love you, Ryan LeJeune," she whispered against his lips.

"And I love you."

Ryan pulled her behind him as they made their way up the stairs to his bedroom. When they made it to the door, her hand ran down his arm, causing him to come undone. He turned, capturing her in his arms.

"Come here," he let out a soft grumble, pulling her even harder, more flush against him. His cock pressed against her stomach, announcing his intentions.

He lowered his lips to hers, gently at first and then with savage abandon. When he inhaled, he breathed in her. Not her scent, her essence. They stumbled back toward the bed and fell into a heap, her on top, him clawing at her clothing.

When she finally lay naked beneath him, he raised himself up so he could really look at her. She was the most amazing woman he had ever known.

"Are you ready for me?" his tone was soft, belying the savage instinct gripping him. He didn't want to make love to her. He wanted to possess her, own her. He wanted to leave his mark on her and make her his forever. But looking down into her face, he knew more than anything else that he wanted to cherish her.

He took her, moving himself slowly into her body, savoring the feel of his dick sliding deeper, deeper into her wet depths. She ran her nails up his back, causing him to stop mid motion. He wanted this to last all night.

"Laura," he begged, hoping she would heed his warning. Instead, she dug her nails deeper, urging him to take her harder.

Plunging into her body, there was no return as she spread herself open for him, holding her lips apart while he pushed himself in deeper, pulling his dick back out almost to the tip and then pushing back in. Her hands skimmed his flesh with every motion as his balls slapped against them.

She moaned, begging him to take her higher. Begging him to come inside her.

Gripping her hips, he settled in before beginning his invasion anew. This time, she was his. He crushed against her forcefully, and she met his every motion, rocking her hips, her pussy, her entire body.

"I'm gonna come," she moaned. His only response was a grunt.

His cock quivered as it shot out a release deep inside of her body. She shook and quaked, meeting his frenzied pace.

Ryan lay spent, his breath coming in slow, shallow spurts. "You're going to be the death of me."

"No, I won't," she snuggled next to him and pulled his arm around her. "I'm here to save you."

He let out a laugh. "You sure about that?"

She nodded. "Pretty sure. I can save your company, your house if you'll let me."

"How can you do that?"

"I told you. I fixed the formula."

"Oh," he smiled sheepishly. "I kind of forgot that important detail last night. I owe you so much."

"You don't owe me anything. I did it for us, for you. To save your company, like I said."

"What about the rest of me?" He turned to look at her in the candlelight and ran a hand down her cheek. "Will you save the rest of me?"

"I don't think it needs saving," she smiled.

"More than you know." He turned onto his back and pulled her fully into his arms. "Laura, I love you. I want to be with you."

She caressed the cinnamon hairs on his chest, paying close attention to his heartbeat. "I love you, too."

"Will you marry me? I mean, I don't have any money or anything. I can't even buy you a ring. But I want you to be my wife."

"Yes, I'll marry you. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"You admit the fudge ripple affected you."

He laughed. "Damn near killed me."

He pulled her closer. This was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Epilogue

Laura sat looking out of the window of her office in New Orleans. The city looked alive beneath her. Cars packed the streets and people filed along the sidewalks. She turned when Cate walked in.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" It was only the fiftieth time Cate had asked this same question.

"Yes, I'm sure. Come on, you're the business whiz kid, even if you dress more like

Britney Spears than a CEO."

"Well, I'm not a CEO. And I'm not going to take your place for permanent. Just for now, okay?"

"I plan on taking leave until well after the baby is born." She patted her increasing girth and smiled. Who would have thought six months ago that she would be sitting in her own New Orleans office, married, pregnant, blissfully happy?

"Then I go back to marketing, right?"

"Yes, then you go back to marketing." Laura rolled her eyes. There had been so many changes inside her company and Ryan's in the past six months, it was hard to keep up with who was doing what. Amanda and Nick were now running the ice cream business full time, Karen and Robin were working with Jeremy at the Ryan's company and she and Ryan were basically just sitting back and watching it all unfold. She had turned marketing over to Cate, who would much rather be doing that than operating the business office in New Orleans.

Laura really wished Cate would consider using her inherent knowledge to take control of the company. She resisted, though, insisting that she didn't want to run a big company like *LeJeune Industries* had become. Laura knew that it was mostly because she missed all the free ice cream afforded her in the past. "You can still eat all the ice cream you want here, you know?"

"I know," Cate sighed, "it's just not the same. I mean, here I am in the big city, you'd think it would be every girl's dream. But there's something missing."

"I know how you feel." Laura remembered those same emotions crossing through her before she met Ryan.

"So, how is the happy husband?"

Laura smiled. "Well taken care of. Especially now that his business isn't in danger anymore. Merging the two was the second... third best thing we ever did."

"Let me guess what the first two were."

"Well, let me know if you need anything, okay? You know we're not that far away."

"I know. And Dusty flies in almost every day now, so if I need anything extra, I'll have him bring it by." Dusty had been named official delivery person and kept both companies stocked. He also occasionally carried paperwork back and forth between the two businesses and their main headquarters.

"I wish Ryan would have agreed to keep headquarters in Oak Creek."

"I know, but he's right. To be competitive right now, you need to be in the heart of business. And when you let me open my ice cream shop downtown, we'll be bringing it straight to the customers this way and via mail."

"You're right. I guess I just hate to spend my time between the two places."

"I know, but your apartment here is really nice. And you've got a big house back home. By the way, how is the *Fudge Ripple* promotion coming along?"

"Actually, I thought I'd hand it over to you. I'm due in three months and we plan to begin distribution by summer. Think you can handle it on top of keeping track with things here?"

Cate smiled, "Sure, not a problem. I can interview models during my breaks."

"Why would you interview models?"

"Don't you think we need a spokesman for the best thing since *Viagra*?"

Laura rolled her eyes, "I figured you'd see an upside to it."
"You bet."

A light knock came on the door, followed by it opening. Ryan stepped through it, the smile on his face going all the way up to his eyes. Laura had never seen him smile so much as he had since she told him about the baby. She stood and crossed the rooms, going into his open arms.

"You ready?"

"Yeah. I think we're through here." She gave him a short kiss, but the look in her eyes promised much more to come later. She turned to Cate, "It's all yours."

"I'll make you proud."

"I know you will."

"And, Laura, I'm serious about the *Fudge Ripple* promotion."

"I figured you were."

They hugged quickly before either of them could start crying. Laura knew this would be her last trip to New Orleans until well after the baby was born. She would miss Cate and her new office. But she was more than happy to stay in Oak Creek and spend time with Ryan, something they rarely got to do since the merger. All their free time had been spent either preparing the business for Laura's leave of absence or preparing for the baby.

"Blake's downstairs," Ryan said into her ear. "He says he's driving us home."

"Did you tell him we were taking a plane?"

"Yeah. Dusty's psyched about the lease of that little airplane we got him."

"Well, it's a business expense. We'll write it off."

He pulled her into the hall. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

"No, I don't think you have."

"Come here and let me show you, then."

His lips covered hers and their bodies pressed as closely together as they could.

Laura felt the baby kick, and, judging by the smile that interrupted the kiss, Ryan felt it, too. His hand slid down her body to rest on her stomach. She closed her eyes, reveling in the sensation. From now on, everything was going to be wonderful.

About the author:

Alicia's interest in romance began as a child when she used to hide out reading her mom's forbidden romance novels. She remembers very distinctly the first time she ever read *Gone with the Wind* and was instantly hooked on the concept of the Southern gentlemanly rake. She likes to think that there's a little bit of Rhett in all of her heroes, whether they be sexy cowboys or dark and brooding rock stars.

Always writing against a soundtrack, Alicia finds inspiration for her cowboys and contemporary heroes from country musicians such as Kenny Chesney. Her love for the gothadelic sounds of Type O Negative has inspired several vampire stories and stories about tragically beautiful musicians. Other inspirations include the music of Saliva, Van Halen, Santana, Blake Shelton, and Prince. (She's a Gemini. That explains the wide variety of influences!)

Alicia has completed several manuscripts ranging from comedic contemporaries to dark, sexy paranormals and fantastical futuristics.

Her favorite ice cream is Godiva's dark chocolate truffle. Eaten straight from the container, it is almost—almost—as good as reading erotica!

Alicia Sparks welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.